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Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

Charles F. Wagner and Charles J. Wagner

CAYMUS VINEYARDS: A FATHER-SON TEAM PRODUCING DISTINCTIVE WINES

Interviews Conducted by
Carole Hicke
in 1993

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Charlie Wagner, circa 1990

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Interviewed in 1993 by Carole Hicke for the Wine Spectator California Wine Oral History Series. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated by Ruth Teiser in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed has been made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the current chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute; Ruth Teiser, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

Until her death in June 1994, Ruth Teiser was project originator, initiator, director, and conductor of the greater part of the oral histories. Her book, Winemaking in California, co-authored with Catherine Harroun and published in 1982, was the product of more than forty years of research, interviewing, and photographing. (Those wine history files are now in The Bancroft Library for researcher use.) Ruth Teiser's expertise and knowledge of the wine industry contributed significantly to the documenting of its history in this series.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his or her own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State

Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Carole Hicke
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Winemen
Oral History Series

July 1994
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

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INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Carole Hicke

Charles F. "Charlie" Wagner's family have been in the Napa Valley wine business since 1906, when his father purchased a farm that included vineyards. Charlie himself had been growing grapes since 1943, but until the early 1970s, he had never made wine, other than a few batches annually for home consumption. Still, his homemade wine had brought him a reputation for skill as a winemaker, and he eventually decided to go into commercial winemaking if his son would agree to help; otherwise, he considered selling the vineyard. The son, Charles J. "Chuck" Wagner, agreed to the venture, and the two of them put up the winery themselves.

Named Caymus after a group of California Indians, this new winery made wines from the premium varieties Charlie had planted in mid 1960s--Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir, and some Johannesberg Riesling. Charlie continued using the techniques he had developed over the years of making wine at home, producing wines that were well received.

As the Cabernet Sauvignon attracted more and more attention in the mid-1970s, the Wagners gradually increased production, although never to the point of adding more than one employee a year. They had decided not to produce greater quantities but to concentrate on making wines of high quality and consistency.

Father and son developed the distinct Caymus wine style as a team and continue to make the tasting decisions together, though Chuck has gradually assumed more responsibility for the overall management. Evidence of his hands-on attention to every detail is his work with coopers in Missouri and Ohio to develop a method of toasting American oak to his specifications. Both men agree on the absolute importance of the vineyard--its soil and climate--in forging the wine.

And both agree that Caymus Vineyards will continue as a family business. "We would like to start a tradition that we see has been going on for years [in Europe]," notes Chuck. Such a tradition contributes significantly to Napa Valley winemaking.

Charles F. and Charles J. Wagner were interviewed on November 15 and 16, 1993, at the Caymus Vineyards winery as part of the Wine Spectator California Wine Industry Oral History Series. Each reviewed his transcript, making a few emendations. Karen Perry was helpful in arranging appointments and furnishing information. Merrilee Proffitt was responsible for book production, and Judy Smith transcribed the tapes.

This series is part of the ongoing documenting of California history by the Regional Oral History Office, which is under the direction of Willa Baum, Division Head, and under the administrative direction of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Carole Hicke
Project Director

July 1994
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Regional Oral History Office
Room 486 The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Charles John Wagner

Date of birth 9-9-51 Birthplace St. Helena

Father's full name Charles Frank Wagner

Occupation Winegrower Birthplace Rutherford, CA

Mother's full name Lorna Belle Galos

Occupation Housewife Birthplace St. Helena, CA

Your spouse Charlotte Ann Quist

Occupation Travel agent Birthplace Garden City, Kansas

Your children Charlie, Joe, Terry, Erin, Wagner

Where did you grow up? Rutherford, Napa Valley, California

Present community Rutherford - Napa

Education High School diploma

Occupation(s) Winegrower

Areas of expertise Winegrowing

Other interests or activities Fishing, hunting

Organizations in which you are active Director on Napa Valley Exposition Board, Advisory member ~~of~~ on Vinifera Board

BACKGROUND

[Interview with Charles F. "Charlie" Wagner: September 15, 1993]##[1]

Family

Hicke: I'd like to start this afternoon by asking you when and where you were born.

C.F. Wagner: I was born a quarter of a mile from this site here on the farm that my parents bought in 1906. I was born in 1912.

Hicke: Let's back up a little bit and find out how your parents and grandparents got here.

C.F. Wagner: My father emigrated from Alsace in 1885.

Hicke: Why did he come?

C.F. Wagner: The war of 1870 forced German rule on that area, and his parents were very upset with the rule of the German regime, so two of the boys left home and came to the United States. My uncle came first, and when he came to this country he worked as a section hand on the Union Pacific when they were putting the railway through. When they entered the Nebraska Territory, well, he wanted to get back in agriculture. He had saved a few dollars, and he got off the train, so to speak, and homesteaded. He set up a farming enterprise in Nebraska.

Hicke: What was his name?

C.F. Wagner: His name was John. My father left there in '85--the uncle came two years previous.

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[1]This symbol (##) indicates the beginning of a tape or a segment of tape. For a guide to the tapes, see page following transcript.

Hicke: Your father's name?

C.F. Wagner: His name was Charles. He came directly to the area that his brother had settled in, and he also homesteaded in Nebraska. From 1885 to 1890, weather conditions were very severe; winter conditions were rough in Nebraska. Being a single man, he forgot about it--gave up his homestead, and he took a train and came to San Francisco.

Hicke: Wasn't that when all the cattle were killed in storms?

C.F. Wagner: I don't know, but he said the weather conditions were such that he didn't feel as though he could tolerate them.

Hicke: Did he ever tell you stories about coming over on the ship?

C.F. Wagner: No. I was very remiss in not asking questions when someone was able to answer them, but you don't think of those things when you are young. The uncle stayed in Nebraska.

Hicke: Do you know what they were farming in Nebraska?

C.F. Wagner: Corn and other grains. The uncle ultimately went into livestock and bought hogs. My father, when he hit San Francisco, went to work in the brewing industry.

Hicke: Can you tell me what year he came to California?

C.F. Wagner: He came to California in 1890.

Hicke: Do you recall the name of the brewery he worked for?

C.F. Wagner: I have no recollection of the name of the brewery. He might have said it, but--. There were several large breweries in San Francisco at that time. He took a night job, shoveling malt. Night work paid a few pennies more per hour.

My mother came to this country in about 1897. She had an uncle who was living in San Francisco at that time. He had come previously.

Hicke: Where was she from?

C.F. Wagner: Bremen, Germany.

Hicke: What was her name?

C.F. Wagner: Katherine Dellbrugge.

Hicke: Does that mean bridge?

C.F. Wagner: It's a Dutch name. The family originally started out in Emden, which is right down on the Dutch border. My grandfather must have had Dutch ancestry from the name. He was a tailor by trade, and he set up business in Bremen.

Hicke: How old was your mother when she came over here?

C.F. Wagner: She was eighteen or nineteen.

Hicke: That was a long way to go.

C.F. Wagner: Well, that's the way it was in those days. My parents met in 1898 or 1899, and they married in 1900. She was working as a house maid for a family, and after they married she opened a small delicatessen store, and my father continued working in the brewery.

Hicke: She was a good cook, I bet.

C.F. Wagner: She was a good cook, yes. Most of those people were good cooks.

Hicke: Did she specialize in German cooking?

C.F. Wagner: German food, yes. My father wanted to get back into agriculture, and they looked in Sonoma County and here [Napa Valley]. When the [1906] earthquake hit, this was the deciding factor. They wanted out of San Francisco. They had two children then and one on the way.

Vineyard and Winery

C.F. Wagner: They came to the Napa Valley, and they bought the property where the Honig establishment is now.

Hicke: Can you describe where that is?

C.F. Wagner: It's just a quarter of a mile from here.

Hicke: North?

C.F. Wagner: No, almost due west from here.

Hicke: How many acres was it?

C.F. Wagner: There were sixty-seven acres on the whole property.

Hicke: What was there when they bought it?

C.F. Wagner: There was a small acreage in grapes, and pasture and hay land. That's what was there when they bought it. If my memory serves me correctly, I think they paid nine thousand dollars for it.

Hicke: What did your father decide he wanted to do with the property?

C.F. Wagner: He farmed it. He planted more grapes. Like every European family, they had cows and always had a hog or two, and they had chickens, so they had their own eggs, butter, and cheese. It was rather self-sufficient.

Hicke: No hops?

C.F. Wagner: No hops. Along about 1914 or '15, my father didn't feel that he was getting what the grapes were worth, so he started his own winery in 1915.

Hicke: I forgot to ask you what kind of grapes they were.

C.F. Wagner: Generic grapes. There was some Riesling, some Sauvignon vert, some Petite Sirah--just a generic mixture.

Hicke: Were they mixed in the vineyard?

C.F. Wagner: They might have been at first, but later he planted bloc by bloc as varieties. He started his own winery and made perhaps 20,000 to 25,000 gallons of wine. His wine was made in the fall and bulked out in the spring of the following year to blending and bottling facilities in the Bay Area. These were generic wines; they were the vin ordinaires of yesteryear.

Hicke: Red and white?

C.F. Wagner: Red and white both. He prospered. He made a few bucks at it.

Hicke: Did your mother help with the winery?

C.F. Wagner: Oh, she worked at it, sure. Hell, women cooked for the help in those days.

Hicke: What were you doing?

C.F. Wagner: I was just a kid; I wasn't born until 1912. I was three years old when he started the winery, so you figure it out. As soon as I was able to do some chores, keeping the wood box full was my job. When I was old enough to hold a milk pail between my legs, I milked cows. That's how I started.

Hicke: You said you had at least two siblings?

C.F. Wagner: I had four sisters. The two older sisters were born in San Francisco, and the other two were born on the farm.

Hicke: So you grew up here when there wasn't much else going on?

C.F. Wagner: No, nothing else going on.

Hicke: There have been enormous changes.

C.F. Wagner: Many, many changes--many for the better, and many not for the better. It was a free world then, you know, and you could do what you thought was best. If you wanted to plant a tree or dig a hole in the ground, you could do it without getting a permit from somebody who didn't know as much about it as you did. It is far different today.

Hicke: Did your father build the winery himself?

C.F. Wagner: Yes, with some help; he hired some help. He converted a barn into a winery; he put in cooperage, insulated it, and so forth.

Hicke: Did you have any neighbors?

C.F. Wagner: There were neighbors. We were surrounded with neighbors. There were neighbors to the south and to the east, and the Napa River was to the west.

Hicke: Were they growing grapes or doing pretty much the same thing that you were doing?

C.F. Wagner: No, not necessarily. I think the people to the south had a small prune orchard and raised sheep. The people to the east had a big field of alfalfa, and alfalfa is cut two or three times a year.

Hicke: There was certainly a wide variety of crops and animals.

C.F. Wagner: My father planted more grapes, more prunes, some pears, kept some hay land, and kept some pasture land. This was the basis of the home property.

I married in 1934 my wife, Lorna.

Hicke: What was her last name?

C.F. Wagner: Her middle name is Belle, and her last name was Glos.

Growing Up in the Napa Valley

Hicke: We need to back up a little bit. Where did you go to grade school?

C.F. Wagner: A little school that was originally on part of our property here, called Liberty School.

Hicke: Oh, now I know where you got your Liberty School label name. Was that a one-room school?

C.F. Wagner: A one-room schoolhouse, yes. I recall as many as thirty-five students under one teacher, with eight grades. They left school with a better education than most of the kids in junior high school today. Believe me.

Hicke: What type of things did you study?

C.F. Wagner: We had a general education. We had reading, writing, and arithmetic; this was grade school. A little history. Let me think for a moment. Gradually the tenants in the school lessened, and when I graduated from grammar school in 1926, I was the lone graduate. It shows how the attendance had decimated.

Hicke: Why was that?

C.F. Wagner: Oh, people moved out. There wasn't the influx of families any more. Most of the people who had families, the children had left home for other walks of life.

I spent four years in St. Helena High School, and after high school I went to work for my father full time.

Working in the Winery During Prohibition

Hicke: What was your father doing all this time? Prohibition came along, for one thing.

C.F. Wagner: The grapes that we grew were shipped east in small lugs. Sometimes he got paid for them, and sometimes he didn't. Sometimes he got a bill for the freight instead of a check for his grapes. It was rough times. He got stuck with 25,000 to 30,000 gallons of wine when Prohibition hit, and the federal government made him retain bond on this and make monthly reports without any recourse. He had to do that for over a period of years until the wine developed sufficient acid that they allowed him to bodily dump it. So that was the end of the little winery at that time.

When Prohibition was repealed, we cleaned up things and reactivated the winery. We had two years' crush on hand, and at that time there was no place for bulk wines, let alone bottled wine; so the wine we had on hand my father sold for distilling purposes, and that ended the winery completely.

Hicke: So after that he didn't--

C.F. Wagner: Nothing over there any more in the way of a winery, but we continued to grow grapes there. It was 1936, I think, when they started the Napa Valley Cooperative, and we were a part of the charter members of the cooperative, so our grapes went there.

Hicke: Do you recall anything about the Prohibition days and what was happening in the valley?

C.F. Wagner: Prohibition days were something else. I think that was the beginning of disrespect for any law and order whatsoever. I recall that there were some large bootleg syndicates started in the valley here, and these folks would turn out a thousand gallons a day of high-proof sugar alcohol. They peddled it, and they even got in the end to where they were highjacking from each other.

I was out of high school then, and I bought sugar alcohol in five-gallon cans for as cheap as $1.75 a gallon.

Hicke: What did you do with it?

C.F. Wagner: [laughs] A couple of fellows from San Francisco would come up who wanted it, so I would take their car and go out and

get three or four cans of that. I'd pay $1.75 a gallon for it, and I collected $6.00 a gallon from them. [laughter] So that was few extra pennies. That's a little bit of history.

Hicke: That's interesting, because there aren't very many good stories about Prohibition.

C.F. Wagner: That isn't a good story. It's really a bad story; there's nothing good about it. It really went on to teach people disrespect for decent law. In bootleg days, in some speakeasies for $1.50 a pint you could buy bathtub gin or whatever. It wasn't good.

High School Days

Hicke: Back to high school. What were you doing in your out-of-school time? Were you helping around the farm?

C.F. Wagner: I had my chores to do. I couldn't go for sports; I had to get home and take care of the livestock and so forth. So I didn't play any sports in high school. I was never an honor student, to be truthful.

Hicke: Were there lots of other kids in your class, or was it a small class?

C.F. Wagner: The class I graduated with in high school was about thirty-three kids.

Hicke: Did most of them leave the area?

C.F. Wagner: Most of them left the area, yes.

Hicke: What did you do when you graduated from high school?

C.F. Wagner: I went to work for my father full time.

Hicke: Before we go any further, have we covered most of your notes that you made on your background?

C.F. Wagner: Pretty much so.

VINEYARD OPERATIONS

The Home Property

C.F. Wagner: After I was out of high school for four years, I married. In '36 I leased the home property and operated that on a share basis with my folks. I did outside tractor work, and I did custom spraying as a sideline.

My father passed away in 1939, and from that time on I leased the property from my mother.

Hicke: When you say the home property, you mean the acreage that your father owned?

C.F. Wagner: That's right.

Spray and Custom Tractor Business

Hicke: And you had a spray business?

C.F. Wagner: I did custom spraying and custom tractor work; I worked other people's farms. On one farm I worked on a cost-plus basis. That was a farm that we ultimately bought. I saw that his fruit was picked and did the necessary work. Whatever it cost me, he got a bill for, and I got a fee for doing whatever needed to be done.

Hicke: That was on a handshake basis?

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Hicke: Do you recall the names of any of the people that you worked for?

C.F. Wagner: I covered a lot of territory in spraying and tractor work. It would be difficult to name names. The man whose farm I operated on a cost-plus basis was named Freyermuth. He was a doctor, and his wife owned the property.

Hicke: But they didn't live there?

C.F. Wagner: No, they lived in San Francisco. Her father was Henry Harris, who was a pioneer in this area. That's how she obtained the property that I operated.

Purchasing the Liberty School Property

C.F. Wagner: They were unhappy with whatever they could get out of the property, and they decided that they wanted to sell it. They asked if I was interested, and I definitely was.

We reached an agreement where we bought it on a contract-of-sale basis. At the close of the deal I paid $1,500 down, with the agreement that I pay $5,000 that crop season, after the crops were in. The going price of the property was $25,000, and that included the Victorian that is north of where my son lives and the rights to the property that the Liberty School sat on. The original owner of the property, Henry Harris, did deed that piece for school purposes back in the 1800s, with the proviso that should the school ever be abandoned, the property would revert back to his heirs or assignees. So, having purchased the property from his heir, we were an assignee, and I filed against the district and got back that acre and a half, or whatever the school property amounted to, as part of the original deal.

That's how Liberty School came into the picture.

Hicke: Is Liberty School still there?

C.F. Wagner: No, we used the building to house transient labor to harvest crops for a few years. One spring we were over at the coast, and while we were away some vandals got in there and broke all the windows--multi-pane, six-foot windows--and smashed the doors up. The building was in need of a new roof then, so we decided there was no use to try and repair it; we'll take it down, since we want to build here anyhow. So the lumber from that building went into my home.

Hicke: So you still have part of the Liberty School.

C.F. Wagner: That's right.

Hicke: Whom did you hire for transient labor?

C.F. Wagner: Usually Mexican people. We had connections. Sometimes Puerto Rican people. You'd get a man in who had a crew of people, and he would contract to pick your prunes or pick your grapes, and he took care of the people who worked under him. That was the basis of the operation.

Hicke: That's what everybody up and down the valley did?

C.F. Wagner: Yes. I had four sisters, and as time went on some were very unhappy with the progress on the property. They thought I was taking advantage of the home place--milking it, in other words. It got to where we couldn't get along with it, so we tried to buy the whole property on the basis that we bought our own property, but nobody would hold still for it. I told my mother, "If you don't want me to run the property, and you don't want me to buy it, sell the God-damned thing." So she sold it to a fellow by the name of Jack Nelson. One of my sisters more or less engineered the deal, which I have many regrets about. It was like a sweetheart deal, a deal that we could have handled without a problem. But the property was gone, and that was the way it went.

Hicke: What were you growing on your property?

C.F. Wagner: Here we had about forty acres in prunes, about twenty acres in walnuts, and some land that was planted here and there to a few almond trees up in back.

Hicke: It must have been beautiful in the spring.

First Plantings: 1943

C.F. Wagner: It was, yes. We planted our first grapes, if I recall correctly, in '43.

Hicke: What did you plant?

C.F. Wagner: We planted ten acres of Burger and about twelve acres of Napa Gamay.

Hicke: How did you decide on those?

C.F. Wagner: We wanted production. We were dealing with ordinary grapes that went to--at that time we had dropped out of the cooperative, and we belonged to Allied Grape Growers. These grapes went to Allied. Tonnage was tremendously high. As we went along, prunes sort of fell by the wayside, and we couldn't make young trees grow any more. It seems we had a bacteria gomosis problem--that's what the University [of California, Davis] called it--with young trees. We planted seven acres of young trees, and in three years I didn't have an acre left, so we took out the prune trees and went for varietal grapes.

We planted first some Pinot noir, some Cabernet Sauvignon, and some Riesling.

Hicke: How did you choose these?

C.F. Wagner: Not for any particular reason, except that they were paying pretty good money for them.

Hicke: Did you talk to other people about it?

C.F. Wagner: Yes. It wasn't like it is today, where everything is Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. This business wasn't as sophisticated then.

CAYMUS VINEYARDS

Starting the Winery

C.F. Wagner: We went along, and we didn't feel as though we were being paid for our varietal grapes according to their value.

Hicke: You were selling these to Allied Grape Growers?

C.F. Wagner: Yes, we were with Allied. As a matter of fact, I sat on the board of directors of Allied Grape Growers from about 1968 to 1974. I had an understanding with the president of the board and the other members that as long as we drew a new contract every year, I could gradually siphon off grapes from the gross delivery for our own use.

We got to talking about a winery here, and I was rather undecided. I said, "Well, why do I want to do it alone?" Chuck, was just out of school then. He had put a couple of years in junior college and wasn't doing any good there. I said, "If we start a winery, do you want in on it? If you don't, we'll consider selling the property." Chuck said, "No, I think I'd like to go for it."

At that time, frankly, I don't think Chuck knew a good glass of wine from a glass of water.

More on Vineyard Operations: 1940s

Hicke: Let's back up to the 1940s for a minute. You had just planted Burger and Napa Gamay grapes. I would like a little more detail about what was happening in the forties and fifties.

C.F. Wagner: Well, the grapes were sold.

Hicke: When did you get into Allied Grape Growers?

C.F. Wagner: I went into Allied Grape Growers in about 1960.

Hicke: Before that, who were you selling to?

C.F. Wagner: The Napa Valley Cooperative. I could be off on the dates, but it's pretty close.

Hicke: How many acres of grapes did you plant in '43?

C.F. Wagner: About seventeen acres.

Hicke: Then you had to wait for a while, obviously.

C.F. Wagner: Yes, for it to come into production.

Hicke: Is that a hard time to get through?

C.F. Wagner: You have other crops, you know. We were heavy in prunes at the time, and the prunes kept us going. On the home property we had our own drying facilities, and between the two properties we had about eighty acres of prunes. I also dried prunes for other folks.

Hicke: When are prunes harvested?

C.F. Wagner: Oh, you can harvest prunes starting about the first week in August.

Hicke: A little before the grapes, then?

C.F. Wagner: They are always before the grapes, except this year. This year I have two prune trees, and we picked a lot of grapes before I picked those two prune trees. So I don't know the answer.

Hicke: There isn't any answer that covers everything, is there?

C.F. Wagner: No. As things went on, I was still operating the home property, and I did lease other properties--some prune orchards and hay land, or grain land. I did raise hogs at one time; I believe I could have had as many as two hundred head of hogs.

Hicke: What did you do with them?

C.F. Wagner: This was under the [Franklin D.] Roosevelt administration. They had surplus grain, and I bought alfalfa hay by the

carload. I had a hammer mill, and we mixed up the mash for the hogs to eat. This was hog business. Then, all of a sudden, without any notice whatsoever, FDR raised the price of feed grain beyond what I thought I could pay, and he dropped the price of hogs, all in one stroke of the pen. So I couldn't get out of hogs fast enough.

Hicke: Was this in the mid-forties?

C.F. Wagner: It was in the late forties.

Hicke: After you got out of hogs, what did you spend your time on? You must have been spending a lot of time on the hogs.

C.F. Wagner: Oh, they didn't take that much time. I had a couple of boys from Oklahoma working for me.

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Hicke: Did you concentrate more on grapes?

C.F. Wagner: I concentrated on the fruits that we were producing, grapes and prunes.

Hicke: After you first planted the Burger and Napa Gamay grapes, did you plant more of that later?

C.F. Wagner: No, that's all of those grapes that I planted.

Hicke: What was happening in the war years? Did it affect your farm?

C.F. Wagner: No. We were in prunes and grapes, and also we had the hogs then. We raised hay and grain on leased property. We did whatever we could to keep things going.

Hicke: Did a lot of people leave at that time?

C.F. Wagner: I don't think so. I think the people who had left mostly were those who were drafted, the young men who were drafted into the service.

Hicke: How about the fifties? You slid through those in a hurry.

C.F. Wagner: No, I think we covered it pretty well. Incidentally, I didn't tell you that in the forties we had a pretty heavy mortgage on the property on this contract-of-sale basis, so we cut off five acres, with the Victorian, and we sold that

for $7,500. This relieved the pressure of the mortgage that we had the time.

Hicke: Was the rise in property value because people were getting interested in this area?

C.F. Wagner: No. There was a lady by the name of Florence Fargo Wheeler, a descendant of the Wells Fargo family. Her father was Wells, and I think her uncle was Fargo--one or the other. She bought the property. The property, in the interim between then and now, has changed hands three or four times. Some renovation took place there, but the last sale of that Victorian and five acres went for $1,005,000.

Hicke: Oh, my. Well, at least you got out from under your mortgage.

C.F. Wagner: That's right. What are you going to do?

Hicke: So you just kept on with the prunes and the grapes?

C.F. Wagner: That's right. I believe it was in '63 that we bought another property, between here and Rutherford. It had been used for row crops and pasture. We cleaned it up and planted that to Cabernet Sauvignon and some Chenin blanc. I think we paid $47,500 for that property.

In '66 I had a disgruntled employee who had left under bad circumstances, and came back and pumped seven 22 slugs in me. It laid me up in the hospital for about two months. Along about that time, I thought, "I don't know if I'll ever be able to do all the things I'd like to do again," so we sold that piece of property that we had developed. That was the end of that piece of development.

Hicke: Let me ask you a little bit about planting. Did you have to worry about things like spacing?

C.F. Wagner: Spacing is a matter of choice, I think. Everyone has his own ideas. I think most of us do our own experimental work in that respect. At first, all the vineyards here were mostly planted eight foot by eight foot. Then I put in a couple of small pieces of ten by ten. The University was recommending wider spacing, and we found that very discouraging, because you couldn't hang that many extra pounds of grapes on a grapevine to make up for the difference.

Hicke: Why did they want you to use wider spacing?

C.F. Wagner: I don't know what their theory was. That's something you'll have to ask them about. When we put our varietal grapes in, we came on the idea of keeping the spacing ten foot in one direction, and we planted six foot the other way. That gave us many more vines to the acre, and that is perhaps one of my favorite spacings today. You can get through the ten-foot way for cultivation and your gondolas, and you still have the vines close together.

Hicke: So you still have vines planted ten by six?

C.F. Wagner: Yes, we still have some ten by six. My son is experimenting with different plantings; it's his choice now.

Hicke: In the forties and fifties, and maybe even in the sixties, people didn't think too much about the soil and the microclimates.

C.F. Wagner: I think there are many, many different microclimates in the valley here. I think we have about four different types of soil on this property.

Hicke: Is that right?

C.F. Wagner: Yes, there's a wide variation. These lands are either of volcanic origin, or they are alluvial soils laid down by sedimentation from heavy flooding in years past, or they are a mixture of both. There are areas that I wouldn't want to plant Cabernet Sauvignon on, and there are areas that I wouldn't want to plant some other varieties.

Caymus Cabernet Sauvignon

Hicke: Your Cabernet is your most famous wine.

C.F. Wagner: We put the first Cabernet planting--I was looking for a clone of Cabernet that perhaps didn't over-bear but gave reasonable production. I wanted a little looser bunch that ripened maybe a little earlier. We ran into such a clone, and we propagated from that. That's our mainstay today yet.

Hicke: Can you tell me what clone it is?

C.F. Wagner: I don't know what clone it was. I can't think of the name of the man whose property it came from.

Hicke: It came from another grower?

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Hicke: It was obviously a success.

C.F. Wagner: That and the particular soil it was put in.

Hicke: What kind of soil is it?

C.F. Wagner: We're on more or less well-drained soil. It's gravelly loam for the most part.

Hicke: Is that the alluvial or the volcanic soil?

C.F. Wagner: A mixture, really, when you come right down to it. We come right down to the creek here, and we run into deep alluvial soils. A little farther away we run into the volcanic soils. There's a tremendous mixture.

Hicke: So you have Cabernet on both kinds of soil?

C.F. Wagner: Yes. We find that by proper pruning and perhaps trellising, which my son is experimenting with, we get good quality, and we get production from both ends.

Hicke: Did you do any trellising when you first started planting?

C.F. Wagner: No. We had wires, if you want to call that trellising.

Hicke: What kind of wires?

C.F. Wagner: We had a basic wire. It was cordon pruning that we used. We ran the vines on cordons, and then we ran two wires up above that we trained our canes on. This was the basic structure for a number of years.

Hicke: How did you know about pruning of vines?

C.F. Wagner: That's a hard question to answer. I think you grow into it. There's no teacher for that. You do your own experimentation, and you find that which best suits your needs.

Hicke: Did your father help you along with any of this?

C.F. Wagner: No, he wasn't living when we bought this property.

Hicke: He probably didn't worry about pruning.

C.F. Wagner: Oh, he pruned, yes, but it was the old-fashioned, spur pruning that was used on the vin ordinary grapes of yesteryear.

Hicke: It was not the fine art that it is today?

C.F. Wagner: Oh, no. It is an art today.

Other Growers: Laurie Wood

Hicke: Who else was growing grapes around here in the fifties?

C.F. Wagner: Everyone was leaning heavily towards grapes at that time. I don't know when the neighbors pulled their other crops out, but it was a gradual changeover into grapes.

Hicke: Are there any others around now who were growing grapes here then?

C.F. Wagner: The only one that I could name at this time is perhaps Laurie Wood. He grew up in the area, and he was raising grapes at that time. Properties have changed hands, so everything changes.

Hicke: I'm interested in learning as much as I can about the early growers.

C.F. Wagner: Beaulieu Vineyard (BV) pioneered the varietals in this area. When they sold out to Heublein, that was the end of BV, but there are still grapes there.

Hicke: Did you exchange information with other people on grape growing, weather, and things like that?

C.F. Wagner: Not really, no. I think everyone perhaps did their own experimentation.

Hicke: Farming is a difficult business, I should think; it's chancy.

C.F. Wagner: It's a way of life.

Hicke: You look as though you expect to accept philosophically whatever comes as a farmer.

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Hicke: It sounds hard to me, since you don't know what is coming.

C.F. Wagner: It's not a formula that you can go by, add different things together, and have a net result.

Hicke: I guess that's what makes it seem so difficult--that it is different every year.

C.F. Wagner: Every year is different. It's all in the laps of the gods. Mother Nature is the guiding light of the whole procedure.

Hicke: I forgot to ask if your father grew up on a farm in Alsace.

C.F. Wagner: Yes, they farmed there.

Hicke: Have you got anything else in your notes?

C.F. Wagner: No, I think that's it.

Yeasts

Hicke: What yeasts do you use? That's part of the winemaking process, and maybe we don't want to go into that now.

C.F. Wagner: My son can talk to you about winemaking. In the early days of winemaking we just used natural yeast; things just fermented without benefit of any cultured yeast. Today it's almost a science. We control fermentation temperatures, we add a cultured yeast. First we add sulfite to subdue the wild yeasts, and then we add the cultured yeast that gives us a more predictable and controllable fermentation.

Pests and Pesticides

Hicke: What about pests and pesticides in the early days?

C.F. Wagner: Mildew was the biggest thing we had to fight with in the early days, and we used sulfur for that. Later on we had the same thing that we have today: we had leafhoppers sometimes, and we sprayed for those. We haven't sprayed for the last couple of years for leafhoppers; they haven't been a problem. The leafhoppers are usually the thing that spreads Pierce's disease. In the stream we have back here there were a lot of

wild berries, and we found that we had a pattern of Pierce's disease going right out from where those heavy wild berry patches were. So we made a clean sweep and obliterated the berries completely. We burned them all first and then sprayed the area, and there are no more berries.

Hicke: They were sheltering the leafhoppers?

C.F. Wagner: They carried the disease, and the vector, as we call the leafhopper, took it from the berry vine into the vineyard. The strange thing about it is that at that time the University recommended planting wild berries in order to help control Pierce's disease. It's hard to believe that. We proved the exact opposite of that.

Hicke: You planted the varietal grapes in the sixties.

C.F. Wagner: In '66, yes.

Hicke: What made you decide to do that?

C.F. Wagner: We thought in terms of high-quality grapes, and that was where the trend was and where the profit was.

Hicke: Did you see the demand coming?

C.F. Wagner: Oh, the demand was picking up right along.

Hicke: Were you still with Allied Grape Growers?

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Allied Grape Growers

Hicke: When you joined Allied Grape Growers, what was happening there?

C.F. Wagner: Allied Grape Growers at that time was the largest grape growing cooperative or wine cooperative in California. They controlled the Petri brands, the Italian Swiss [Colony] brands, and they owned the big Asti plant. As time went on--I don't know what year it happened, but Heublein was interested, and they gave us a big song and dance about being able to take care of all the grapes we could produce. They gave a long-term contract with the promise of having all the grapes the growers could grow, and all of this sort of thing.

They paid the Allied Grape Growers off on their equities with Heublein stock.

It wasn't long after that when Heublein started to renege on their contract, and it ended up in a long litigation procedure in a federal court. The Allied Grape Growers lost their facilities and the works. Heublein walked away with it.

Hicke: Were you involved in that?

C.F. Wagner: I was sitting on the board at that time. Everything Heublein touched turned to poison. They were murderous.

Hicke: There wasn't much you could do?

C.F. Wagner: No, nothing we could do. Frankly, I think they had the federal judge in their pocket.

Hicke: Do we want to say who the federal judge was?

C.F. Wagner: I have no idea. I couldn't even remember.

Hicke: What was your part in it? What did you have to do? Did you help make decisions?

C.F. Wagner: No, they made the decision in the courtroom. The board voted on this or on that, but any board of directors does.

Hicke: I guess you had to decide if you wanted to go on fighting or settle.

C.F. Wagner: We had to take whatever was handed down to us.

Winery Operations: Marketing

Hicke: I guess now we are almost up to the point where you are deciding to have a winery. Why did you think about that?

C.F. Wagner: We thought it would be the ultimate, really. We thought we would start on a very small scale and really thought that if we made good wine, everybody would beat a path to our door. We soon found that a path didn't develop, so we started to sell through brokers to retail outlets, restaurants, and what have you.

We dumped the brokers over a period of time and tied in with a man by the name of Ira Gorvitz, who ran an organization called Wine Marketing International, and he put our wines out on a national basis. The only problem with Gorvitz was that he would get paid, and then he would send us a check from his company for the wine. He got into us for a couple hundred thousand dollars, and finally we had to break it off. We had some litigation going, and we got rid of him.

Hicke: When was this?

C.F. Wagner: I can't tell you what year it was. Chuck can probably tell you. It was in the late seventies or early eighties.

We took on a marketing director, John Skupny. John dealt with distributors in other states. He was a good boy; he did the job for us. We still dealt on a brokerage basis in California. Then John found that he could do better elsewhere, and he went to work for Clos du Val. It was a walk-away thing where he left us under good circumstances, and we're still friendly.

We dealt with two or three brokers in California, and finally we decided we would go all the way with distributors. Our first distributors in California were Jalco in the north and Bohemian in the South, both owned by one parent company. We did well with them up until about two months ago, when they decided they weren't going to stay in business any longer. They closed their doors and paid us up completely; there was no problem there. Today we are with a big California distributor, Southern Wines and Spirits. Their California division is American Wines.

Gradually over the years I've turned more responsibility over to Chuck. When we started the winery, we did incorporate under the Caymus label. We gave out company stock to the children and to the grandchildren. In order to keep things so that no one could interfere with the operation, I saw to it that Chuck had controlling interest. Down the road, regardless of what happens, no one can put us in disagreeable circumstances.

Hicke: That's important for a family operation.

C.F. Wagner: It is. I didn't want Chuck to go through the problems that I went through with my family, so we nailed that down. Chuck has developed, and for the last five years any success of the business has been his responsibility.

Building the Winery

Hicke: Let's go back to the early days of the winery. Did you build a winery here?

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Hicke: Did you design it, or did you have an architect design it?

C.F. Wagner: No, no architect. No, we didn't fool with an architect. We just put one small building up, and it's still there. Four or five years later we had need for another building, and we put that up. Then we tore half of it down, and we retained half of it along with our bottling line there now. We put a warehouse across the way; that is where we ferment all our white wines now in barrels.

Four years ago we bought three acres from the neighboring property, which we're on now, and decided we were going to put this big building up. We had need for warehousing; we were renting two warehouses elsewhere, and we wanted to bring everything in-house. That's how it stands today.

Hicke: It was in 1971 or '72 that you started the winery?

C.F. Wagner: We started the winery in '72.

Hicke: That's when it was bonded?

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Making Wines: 1972

Hicke: What were your first wines?

C.F. Wagner: Cabernet Sauvignon, some Riesling, Pinot Noir, and we did pioneer a blush wine of Pinot noir that we called Pinot Noir Blanc.

Hicke: Is that right? When was that?

C.F. Wagner: In 1972. We didn't push it. If we had pushed it, that could have been the blush wine today instead of White Zinfandel; but we didn't. It has kind of fallen by the wayside today. It's not our main item. We concentrate more on the wines that we're best known for and that we do best.

Hicke: When was your first crush?

C.F. Wagner: In '72.

Hicke: I want to find out how you go about acquiring the talent for tasting wine.

C.F. Wagner: That's something that you could almost call self education. You taste, and you taste again, and if you like what you are tasting--let's put it this way, and I tell many people the same thing: you as an individual are your own wine expert. If it satisfies your palate, and you like what it is, then it's the wine you like, regardless of what anybody tells you or what you read. If you don't like it, certainly it's not your wine. If somebody tells you a wine is terrible, and you like, so be it. Wine is very personal.

Hicke: But how do you learn to taste wine so that you can make a wine that gets the high acclaims that yours does?

C.F. Wagner: The high acclaim that wine gets starts out in the vineyard with the grapes you crush. Then with the clean and proper vinification you develop a wine, and it either ages well and flies, or it doesn't. We were just lucky in that respect. We had a good combination, and it was a stroke of luck.

Hicke: Did you have goals in mind when you started with your Cabernet?

C.F. Wagner: Not necessarily, no. It was just that as time went on, we got the message from the critics, and we began concentrating more on the awards that we got.

Hicke: I think wine tasting must be an art.

C.F. Wagner: No, it's personal. You either like it, or you don't. It's as personal as your choice of friends.

Hicke: How do you develop complexity in a wine?

C.F. Wagner: That's up to the individual's palate, whether they think a wine has complexity or not--I think. Wine stands on three things: acid, tannin, and fruit, if you want complexity, but

that's only my opinion. These have to be together in the proper sequence, just like a proper marriage is at least three elements. If a wine is too tannic and your tannin stands out, it takes away the fruit. It takes acid to balance those, because if wine doesn't have sufficient acid, down the road it will be blah. It's a balanced product.

Hicke: Do you taste other wines?

C.F. Wagner: We taste other people's wines, yes. We want to know what other people are doing.

Hicke: Mostly Californians, or French?

C.F. Wagner: On occasion we taste some French wines, but it's mostly wines that we compete against. Oregon doesn't offer us any problem; they're not in our Cabernet [class], they're not in our Sauvignon Blanc, and so forth. Washington produces some pretty fine Merlot, and some people like the Washington Cabernet. Again, it's a matter of taste. I wouldn't condemn their wines, but they're not to my palate. That's the way it is.

Hicke: Are your wines consistent? Do you aim for consistency?

C.F. Wagner: We aim for consistency, yes. I think that's the bottom line, in order to keep the public happy with you. They are entitled to a consistent product. They buy a bottle of wine of a given brand now, and a year from now they see that brand of a different vintage. They have it, and it is totally different; it is not consistent, and they don't feel confident with you any more. You've lost their confidence, in my book. It's the same thing as buying a car, and you get a lemon. You're not going to buy that make of car again. It's the same with shoes or other clothes; if you get unhappy with a brand, you won't be going back. I think wine is in the same category.

Hicke: How do you deal with changes in the weather to maintain your consistency of the wines?

C.F. Wagner: That has never bothered us. Since we have been in business, we have not had a year when we have had red wine problems. Only one year did we have a white wine problem, and that was in '82. They were musty-flavored with a total lack of fruit. No one produced a decent white wine. Some were better than others, and some weren't worth a damn. There were no truly good white wines produced in '82.

Hicke: That was a weather problem?

C.F. Wagner: Rot. The rot started, and the wines all had an off lick [?].

Equipment

Hicke: Do you remember anything about that first crush? Did it all go according to plan?

C.F. Wagner: [laughs] We had a little Mickey-Mouse crusher, and we had to fork the grapes into the little Mickey-Mouse by hand.

Hicke: Was it a hand crusher?

C.F. Wagner: No, it was a little electric crusher with a one-horse power motor on it. You had to get into the must pump with your hand or a baseball bat and shove the stuff in there so it would go through. It was problematic. It was almost on a hand-to-hand basis.

Hicke: Where did you get these little machines?

C.F. Wagner: We bought them from a little business--that's still in the business--in St. Helena, The Compleat Winemaker. We still have the little crusher that we loan out to people who want to make a little wine for themselves.

As we have progressed, we have changed equipment somewhat. I bought used equipment from a place that was once a winery that went defunct. It was the first heavy-duty equipment that we bought, and that served our purpose for a number of years. Then we upgraded and put in the crusher that we have today. We have had three different press systems. The last two have been similar, except the last one has been twice the size; so that's progress.

You never cease spending money in this business.

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Hicke: You were telling me about the bottling.

C.F. Wagner: When we first started it was all hand bottling. We had a little filler thing with three little spouts on it. You would shove a bottle in there, it would get so full, and then you would pull it off. Then they had to be hand-corked, and

the foil had to be put on by hand--spun by hand. It was a hand-to-hand operation.

The label had to be put on by hand. The first thing we used was a little deal that showed the label through, and it glued it. Then you took it and laid the bottle in a little wooden trough, and you could put it on by hand very easily. Then we went to a labeler that we bought used. We had it shipped out from some used equipment place. We had a man go over it, and that worked to some degree.

Then we bought a mechanical corker that answered the purpose for a little while. There was a lot of handwork attached to it, but it would take a series of bottles at one time and ram the corks in. They were then passed on and handled by hand after that.

Then we went for the big bottling line that we have today. It's rather expensive, but when it is operating will do about eighty to eighty-five bottles a minute--that's labeled, palletized, and out the door on the pallet.

Hicke: Quite an improvement.

C.F. Wagner: Yes, and expensive.

Hicke: Does the bank help you finance all of this?

C.F. Wagner: Yes, we have a line of credit with B of A [Bank of America]. We have limitations that we stay well within. We enjoy a very favorable line of credit with B of A, and we want to keep it that way.

Label Design

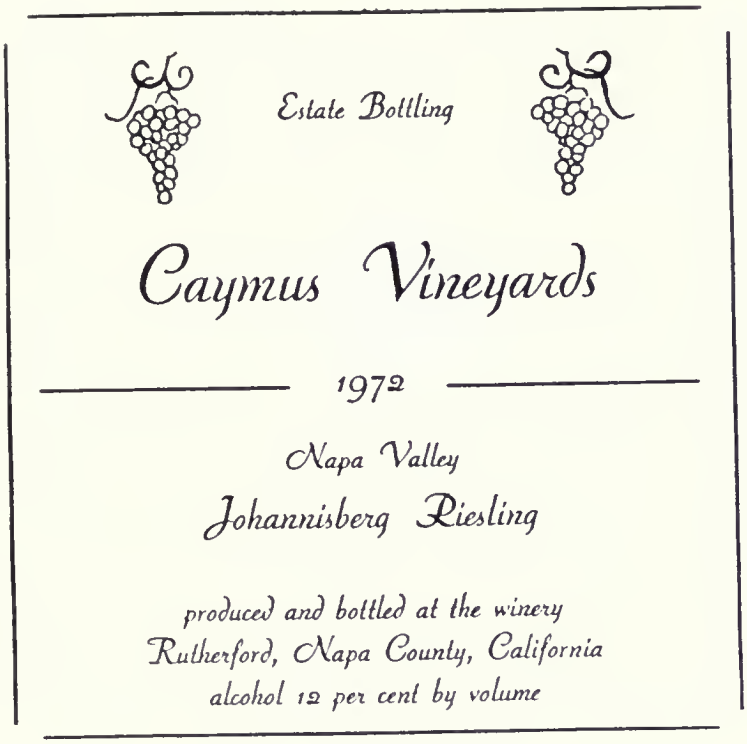
Hicke: How did you design the label?

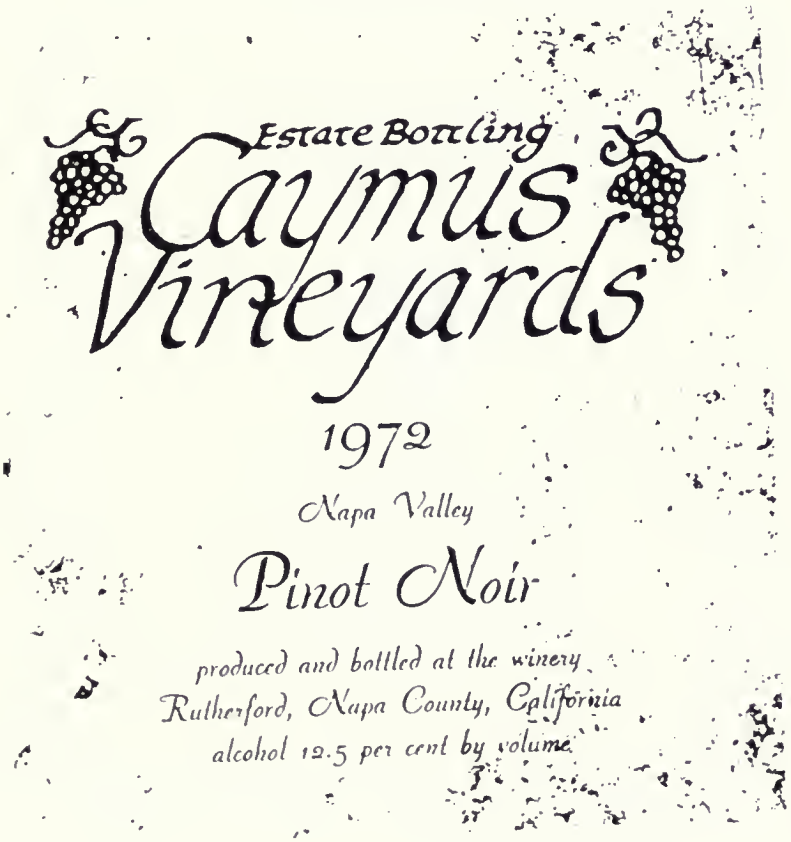
C.F. Wagner: The first labels we had, the wife of some fellow in The Compleat Winemaker did a little hand design.

Hicke: Do you still have a copy of that?

C.F. Wagner: There should be one around somewhere. If I can find one, I'll see that you have it. [see following page] Then we had Sebastian Titus design our next label, which we kept for a number of years. We have upgraded that a little since then.

Examples of Camus Vineyards and Liberty School Lables





1984

CAYMUS VINEYARDS

Estate Bottled

NAPA VALLEY

Cabernet Sauvignon

PRODUCED AND BOTTLED BY
CAYMUS VINEYARDS
RUTHERFORD, NAPA VALLEY, CA.
ALCOHOL 13.0% BY VOLUME

CAYMUS
VINEYARDS

1992

BARREL FERMENTED

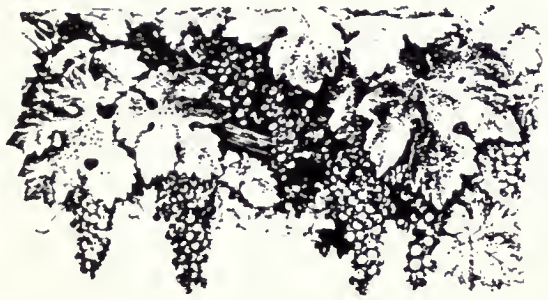
NAPA VALLEY

Sauvignon Blanc

Alcohol 12.0% by Volume

Special *1984* Selection

CAYMUS VINEYARDS



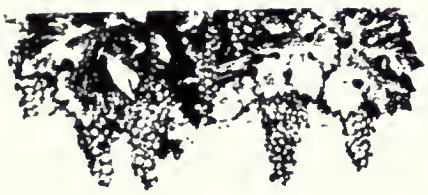
NAPA VALLEY

Cabernet Sauvignon

This wine produced entirely from Cabernet Sauvignon grapes. Aged 4 years in 60 gallon French Limousin and Never barrels

GROWN, PRODUCED & BOTTLED BY
CAYMUS VINEYARDS
RUTHERFORD, NAPA VALLEY, CA.
ALCOHOL 13% BY VOL. CONTAINS SULFITES

CAYMUS
VINEYARDS



Special Selection
NAPA VALLEY
CABERNET SAUVIGNON

28d

Liberty School

Lot 19

California

Cabernet Sauvignon

SELECTED AND BOTTLED BY CAYMUS VINEYARDS
RUTHERFORD, NAPA VALLEY, CA ALCOHOL 13.0% BY VOLUME

LIBERTY

SCHOOL

VINTNER SELECT

CALIFORNIA

CABERNET SAUVIGNON

MADE AND

BOTTLED BY

LIBERTY SCHOOL

RUTHERFORD, CALIFORNIA

SERIES TWO

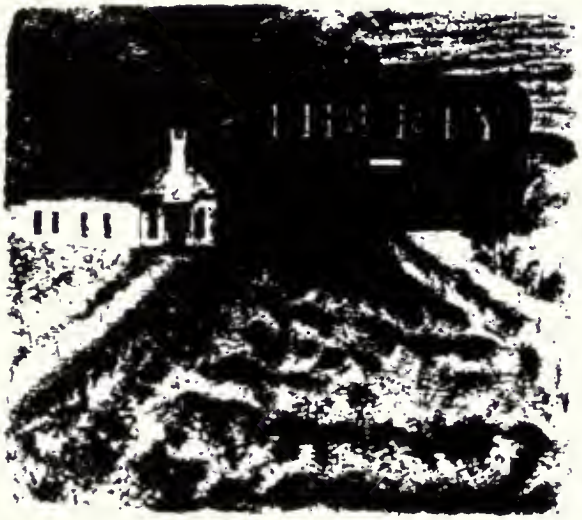
CAYMUS
VINEYARDS

1990

NAPA VALLEY

Cabernet Sauvignon

Alcohol 13.0% by Volume



ALC. 12.5% BY VOL

Hicke: How do you make up your mind to change the design, or how did you decide to change the design?

C.F. Wagner: I don't know. The first label that Titus developed for us was one of my favorites, but they've changed it a little bit since then. I'm out of that today, anyhow.

Hicke: How long did you stay in it?

C.F. Wagner: I started to back off about five years ago. I figured that if Chuck was going to run the business, he'd better get in and run it and not wait until I die first.

Selling the Early Wines

Hicke: What else besides labeling and bottling did you have to do to start the winery?

C.F. Wagner: Well, sell wine. We did buy an interest in Wine Services Co-op when they started the building there, and we stored wine there. All the bottled wine was stored there until we went for our own warehousing here. We still maintain an inventory there of about 20,000 to 30,000 cases, because all out-of-state shipments do go through Wine Services. It's a consolidation point.

Hicke: Is that in Fremont?

C.F. Wagner: No, they started in Fremont, and now it's right across from the high school. It's a big building. I forget what the storage capacity is there--I think a million and a half cases or something like that. There is no distributor that we ship to who buys one whole truckload of wine from us. They'll buy a truckload of wine, and maybe five hundred cases are from us, and two or three hundred cases are from somebody else. Wine Services Co-op loads us consolidated there, and they do all the paperwork and bill us on a monthly basis.

Hicke: How many cases did you bottle that first year, '72?

C.F. Wagner: I'm only guessing, and my son may tell you differently, that it was around 1,500 cases.

Hicke: And it was primarily Cabernet?

C.F. Wagner: No, it was Pinot Noir.

Alsatian Grapes and Wines

Hicke: How did you happen onto the Pinot Noir Blanc?

C.F. Wagner: I had run into it in Alsace, and I liked it very much. That's why I thought I would try it here.

Hicke: Have you been back to Alsace?

C.F. Wagner: I've been there four or five times. I'd like to go back once more.

Hicke: Did you find the exact farm where your father lived?

C.F. Wagner: The people lived in little villages there, and they farmed outside the villages. People there in those days never lived on the little acreage they had. No one had a given piece of acreage; they had what they would refer to as a few acres here and a few acres there. You understand what I mean; there was no consolidation of acreage whatsoever.

Hicke: They had to trot around to do their farming?

C.F. Wagner: That's right. I still have relatives there. It's an interesting area.

Hicke: I guess that explains your interest in Riesling also.

C.F. Wagner: Yes. We got away from Riesling. We found that Riesling here was not our wine. There is a poor market for it, poor demand, and it didn't measure up to Rieslings from Europe, so why push it? Anything we can do as well or better than they do in Europe, fine.

Pinot Noir

Hicke: How did you decide to make Pinot Noir?

C.F. Wagner: I like Pinot Noir. I got started on Pinot Noir back in the fifties. I was friendly with the foreman of Beaulieu

Vineyard, and when they were through picking there was a second crop. With their permission, I would go out and glean some from the second crop, and I made Pinot Noir for myself.

Hicke: You just liked it?

C.F. Wagner: It was my favorite wine once, but frankly my favorite wine today is an old Zinfandel, and next comes Cabernet Sauvignon.

Zinfandel

Hicke: Do you make a Zinfandel?

C.F. Wagner: We have a good Zin, yes.

Hicke: When did you start doing that?

C.F. Wagner: The first year we made wine, we made a little Zinfandel.

Hicke: Did you increase your amounts of Zinfandel?

C.F. Wagner: To some degree, yes. You know, Zinfandel isn't all that plentiful. Very few properties produce grapes that make good Zinfandel wine. The vines like to struggle a little more, and you would rather have them on a hillside somewhere. It's a vine that, to make fine wine, has to struggle a little more. You don't want Zinfandel growing on lush land. It's all right to use for White Zinfandel, but for a base for a red wine, no. More land produces good Cabernet grapes than Zinfandel grapes.

Hicke: Where are your Zinfandel grapes?

C.F. Wagner: We bought some just west of Rutherford this year. We've tied into a piece of property there, and we're going to see how the wine goes. If we like how the wine turns out, we'll tie the people up with a contract.

Appellations

Hicke: What about appellations? That must have changed a lot.

C.F. Wagner: I disagree with all this sub-appellation stuff. I just can't see it. I think Napa Valley is good enough for an appellation. When you have Rutherford Bench, or Oakville Bench, and all this garbage, you pit one neighbor against the other. If he happens to be on the wrong side of the line, somebody says, "The grapes in this area are worth more than the grapes in your area." It shouldn't be. Regardless of where you are, and your grapes measure up, if they make top wine, you deserve top price--regardless of the bench or particular appellation. I disagree with some appellations.

Hicke: Napa Valley is pretty well known.

C.F. Wagner: Yes. I think if you carry a Napa Valley appellation on your label, and you make wines people like, that's all you need. They'll beat a path to your marketplace. No matter what your appellation is, if your wine doesn't measure up, and people don't like it, then it's not going to fly.

Hicke: You have had such great success with your Cabernet. Can you explain that?

C.F. Wagner: We've strived for consistency. We taste one wine against the other consistently. The grapes from different areas that we put in our Napa Valley Cab--different quantities of them we blend with the grapes from another farm, and we maintain consistency on that basis. As far as the Special Selections is concerned, it comes strictly from our own vineyards, and we choose the very best of our own. After it is in barrels, we go over the barrels and make up our minds how many cases of Special Selections we want for that particular year, and we set that many barrels aside. The wine has to measure up, or it doesn't get marked for such.

Cooperage

Hicke: Speaking of barrels, tell me what you used for cooperage when you first started.

C.F. Wagner: We used some French oak, some American oak, and today we lean very heavily towards American oak. We do buy some French oak yet, but there is an outfit in Lebanon, Missouri, Independent Stave, that gives us just what we want in a barrel. There are many ways of forming barrels. Years ago barrels were formed over live steam in order to get the proper shape to

them, and then they were heavily charred for spirits. That's what the barrels were used for in yesteryear.

Today the barrels are formed over the heat of oak sawdust, and a flame is created there. The degree of toast--not charring; there's a difference between charring and toasting. We specify that we want a light toast, a medium toast, or a heavy toast, and these people give us just what we want in forming the barrel. They do it just the way the French do it. The wood is air-dried for two years before it is used.

I went through cooperage factories in France in Cognac, and it is very interesting. Forming a barrel is an interesting procedure.

Hicke: I've seen some of the wineries in Bordeaux that make their own barrels, so I have a little idea of how they are made. How do you know whether you want a medium toast or a light toast?

C.F. Wagner: We put the wines in them and make our decision. Over the period we've been in business, we have decided just what toast we do want.

Hicke: You just keep tasting?

C.F. Wagner: Yes. We have changed and blended and so forth, and we have come down to a rule of thumb, so to speak.

Hicke: Did you and Chuck do that together?

C.F. Wagner: We did, and now it's his responsibility.

The Wagner Family

Hicke: Let's back up a little bit. I'd like to hear a little about your family. When were your children born?

C.F. Wagner: My wife and I have three children. Our oldest daughter was born in 1937, which makes her fifty-five.

Hicke: What is her name?

C.F. Wagner: Marlene Fisher.

Hicke: What is she doing now?

C.F. Wagner: She is director of food and beverage at Kaiser Hospital in Vallejo.

Hicke: And the second child?

C.F. Wagner: Connie Beitler. She went through college, too. She has three boys, and she devotes her time to them and taking care of the home. I think she took the proper route.

Hicke: Where is she living?

C.F. Wagner: In Medford, Oregon. Her husband is tied in with Medford Wood Products up there. They started a sideline up there of veneers, so he has a piece of the veneer action. He's been in lumber for all of his working life. He has been a lumber salesman, and he travels a bit selling these veneer products for the people he works with.

Hicke: So Chuck was the youngest?

C.F. Wagner: Yes. He was born in '51.

Hicke: Did they all grow up right here?

C.F. Wagner: Yes.

Changes in the Napa Valley

Hicke: Can you tell me a little bit about the changes you have seen over the years in the Napa Valley?

C.F. Wagner: The changes I've seen have not been for the best. We've seen an influx of very wealthy people, and they have raised our property values way beyond reason. I don't like that for the simple reason that it's a tax base. You are taxed on a property tax basis, and the day you die the government taxes your family again on the value thereof. I don't like that. The influx of people here, and the tourists--if it keeps on increasing, where are people going to be?

My wife and I were in St. Helena yesterday, and it was like a jungle. It's like Market Street in San Francisco was twenty years ago. I'm not kidding you. It's unreal.

Hicke: What do you think about the Wine Train?

C.F. Wagner: I'm not in favor of the Wine Train.

Hicke: It doesn't help the congestion?

C.F. Wagner: No, I don't think it helps a damned thing. I think it adds to the congestion. If you're ever on that highway there, and the train happens to be going across the highway, you get a line of traffic held up. If there were a fire someplace, or an ambulance wanted to get through, they would be held up as well. There will be a line of cars a half a mile long, waiting to cross while that train crosses the highway. After all, it's going rather slowly, and there about ten cars on it; use your own imagination.

The thing I don't like about the Wine Train most of all is that where their tracks crossed private property, they renovated that crossing and sent the people a bill for it. Some of these crossings cost these people as much as $15,000 or $20,000 and made them very unhappy. On top of that, they were told they had to carry insurance for their protection for any accident that might happen on that crossing.

So all you have is a restaurant on wheels that is competing with every other restaurant in the valley. They're sucking out of the public hog trough. All these crossings and so forth are put up by tax dollars that wouldn't have been necessary if it weren't for the Wine Train. It isn't a fair shake, that's all.

Hicke: What are the good things that have happened?

C.F. Wagner: Well, people have a nice atmosphere to live in. They eat and drink good food and wine. And we still have our family and friends around us. People learn to live with the influx of tourism. Of course, tourism helps pay the bill here, too.

Hicke: It's such a beautiful place to live.

C.F. Wagner: It is. It has its virtues. But it has become very expensive, you know. We bought this piece of property that this building is on, and for the three acres we paid $50,000 an acre. Then we put this building up, and today we live by the dictates of bureaucracies. Okay, we applied for a building permit. First thing, they came down and looked it over, and they said, "Well, you're on a flood plain. You have to raise the level of your building site two feet." I asked, "Why? Every other building is down on the same

level." "You're on a flood plain." I said, "I talked to people who lived here 150 years ago, and there is no sign of it being under water." "Well, if you want your permit, you will raise the ground level."

We talked about it, and we went to the board of supervisors and went through the hassle there. We would have delayed building for a year, and building costs were going up. We had need for the building; we were paying rent for warehousing elsewhere. So we decided we'd go the route. Raising the level of this ground two feet, hauling the fill in, and so forth, cost $25,000. Just like that, a cost that didn't need to be.

After we got the building going, then we had to have people come in from the sanitation department to decide where we could put our sewage system and drain fields. We dug three holes with a backhoe, and two women came from Napa. They got down in the hole and squeezed the dirt, and they were doubtful whether this had sufficient drainage for what we wanted, but finally they okayed it. That went on for a couple of days--arguments and what-have-you.

Then the septic tank people came in and laid the drain field out. He's a friend of ours, and he said, "Gee, this is some of the best drainage that I've run into in the last two years." That's what he said, against these women feeling the dirt and being doubtful. Oh, it drives you.

Hicke: Quite a change from when your father built his winery.

C.F. Wagner: Oh, you couldn't drive a nail in the building today without a permit.

We have people working in the field, and today we have to keep a sanitary privy out there for them. If someone working in the field were caught urinating in the field, we would be called to task for it. Well, animals go out there, you know. What are we going to do about it? Talk about stupidity.

Hicke: What do you see for the future of the valley?

C.F. Wagner: I think that down the line people might possibly get a little smarter, and maybe one day we will be governed by the people we put in office and not by the bureaucrats they appoint.

Hicke: You think that's a possibility?

C.F. Wagner: It's a possibility. Either that or we will have to go back one day to the vigilante committees. [laughs] It's wild. Take [the Bureau of] Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and the restrictions they put on you and the changes they demand of you. Some years ago on our label we had the name of the wine in a little white box on the label. You've seen it; we went back to it. They sent us a notice that we could no longer use it. We had to "cease and desist" from using the box. So we printed the name of the wine just there. Then down the road we made an application to reestablish that box, and they okayed it. Smart people.

Hicke: How about the state legislature? Do you have any good representatives there?

C.F. Wagner: They're all bureaucracies. People who sit in office, most of them are sitting on their brains, pardon the expression.

Future of the Wine Industry

Hicke: What do you see for the wine industry in general?

C.F. Wagner: Unless one of these environmental organizations comes along and finds something with wine like it did with apples and Alar, and the watermelon scare that we had some years ago, along with the cranberry scare we had once, I think the wine business will move along beautifully. But if we get one of these shoved at us, it could raise hell. Every one of those scares that they had was totally unfounded. Alar was not toxic. The media picked that up and blew it out of proportion.

Rootstocks

Hicke: There is one thing I forgot to ask you about back at the beginning. How did you decide what rootstocks to go with?

C.F. Wagner: The original rootstock, after we got away from the natural rootstock, which are non-resistant vines, we went with St. George. As far as I'm concerned, it's still the one rootstock that is immune to the problems that we have been having. Now there have been several new rootstocks

developed, and Chuck has been experimenting with them. Down the road, who knows, but I still favor the St. George.

Hicke: How did you choose it?

C.F. Wagner: That was the only resistant rootstock we had. Then the University developed A x R #1. Its heritage was partly wild vines blended with some domestic, however they do that. This gave a more predictable crop, more predictable production, along with heavier yield, and it was great--until all of a sudden phylloxera took hold in it. Then they told us it was a new strain of the bug. Frankly, I disagree with that. I think by propagation and re-propagation and re-propagation of that rootstock, it lost its immunity to the phylloxera bug. I think they just went too damned far with it, and then phylloxera took hold. That's only one man's opinion.

Hicke: Are your grapes mostly on St. George still?

C.F. Wagner: We have some St. George yet. We got out of A x R #1 totally the last pulling of grapevines, which was two years ago; we have no more A x R #1. We have young vines coming on that are not yet in production.

Hicke: What are you planting on now?

C.F. Wagner: That's a question for Chuck. He's experimenting with two or three different rootstocks. He probably has some in mind that he will tell you about.

Hicke: I'd say it was a very wise decision to go with St. George.

C.F. Wagner: It was the one rootstock that we had at one time, the only one that was resistant, and it still is resistant. The only thing is that it isn't as predictable as the other rootstocks as far as yield and performance is concerned. But for long life, free of disease and bug problems, it had it.

Liberty School Wines

Hicke: I'd like to ask you about your second label.

C.F. Wagner: Liberty School?

Hicke: Yes.

C.F. Wagner: When we started back in the early seventies, we found that we didn't make sufficient wine, so we bought some wine. We already felt that we had a reputation of good wine, and we didn't want this purchased wine to hurt whatever reputation we had developed at that time. So we searched around for a name for a second label. It dawned on me that this was the property of the old Liberty School; let's call it Liberty School. That's the way it went?

Hicke: Was that in 1976 that you started the second label?

C.F. Wagner: I forget when we stared that. Maybe Chuck can give you some insight into that. Anything I tell you could be off a couple of years. Liberty School stayed strictly with purchased wines for a number of years, and some of those old Cabs, after they were aged, were exquisite.

Hicke: Do you have a library of your wines?

C.F. Wagner: Oh, we have a few old wines, yes, but none that we could offer to the public.

Hicke: But do you keep some from each vintage?

C.F. Wagner: Yes, we have some. I like old wines. They mellow out, and they are like nectar.

Hicke: Do you still have some of your first vintage, too?

C.F. Wagner: Yes. I think we have three bottles left, to be frank with you. Not very much.

Awards and Judgings

Hicke: You have gotten so many awards. How do you feel about that?

C.F. Wagner: We're very happy with all the awards and accolades we have received. We certainly haven't searched for them. We are very happy that our wines have been received and that people have judged them. If anyone doesn't like them, we'd like to be the first to know about it.

Hicke: Do you get much feedback in the tasting room?

C.F. Wagner: We get feedback from the tasting room here, yes. A lot of hype comes out of here. People want pictures of this and that. I guess it's like Old Homecoming Week to some of them.

Hicke: What about auctions? Do you participate in auctions?

C.F. Wagner: No. I think we entered the Napa Valley auction at Meadowwood a few times, but I think Chuck has opted not to enter that for the last couple of years.

Hicke: How do you feel about growing or staying the same size?

C.F. Wagner: We don't look for any more expansion. We even live with the growers we buy grapes from. If the grapes don't measure up, we have a clause in the contract to drop the grower. We pay top money for what grapes we buy, and we want top quality merchandise, and folks are happy to deliver it.

Hicke: You want to stay about the same production size?

C.F. Wagner: Thereabouts, yes. We're not looking for expansion there, no. What for? We don't want to compete with the big boys.

Origin of the Name "Caymus"

Hicke: I want to ask you where the name Caymus came from.

C.F. Wagner: According to California history, Mexico held jurisdiction for a short period of time in California after the passing of the padres, during which time they actually gave the land away in huge land grants all over the states. Many people thought of them as Spanish land grants, but they were actually Mexican land grants.

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C.F. Wagner: A man by the name of Yount came to this area in the 1830s or early 1840s, and became acquainted with and worked with the Mexican governor-general of that era, General [Mariano] Vallejo. Vallejo encouraged Yount to apply for such a grant, which he did, and he was the recipient of the first land grant of this area. He headquartered in the area that bears his name today, Yountville. In naming his vast landholdings, some 11,800 acres, he did name it after a sub-tribe of Indians that were referred to as Kaimus. Later it was spelled with a "C" and was referred to as Caymus. Whether

the Indians actually called themselves that or not, no one knows.

But that's how it came about, and when we incorporated in 1971, we thought we would use the land-grant name that is our trademark name, which we did.

Hicke: That's really interesting. You are indeed a student of history.

C.F. Wagner: Not necessarily, but you learn a few things if you live long enough.

Hicke: Thank you very much.

C.F. Wagner: You're welcome, young lady.

Transcribed by Judy Smith

Chuck Wagner, 1993.

Photograph by J. Patrick Forden

BACKGROUND

Agriculture in the Napa Valley

[Interview with Charles J. "Chuck" Wagner: September 16, 1993]##[1]

Hicke: Let's start this morning by asking you when and where you were born.

C.J. Wagner: I was born in St. Helena at St. Helena Hospital on September 9, 1951.

Hicke: You grew up here in the Napa Valley?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, of course. I was born and raised here, as well as were my parents. As a matter of fact, I was born in the same year, 1951, that my father built the house here, so I came to this ranch as my mother and father moved to this ranch. This is the only place I've ever lived.

Hicke: As you were growing up, what was the Napa Valley like?

C.J. Wagner: My family has seen a lot of agricultural business. I know you talked to my father about this previously, but I'll go ahead and try to reduce it to a small amount of time. When my dad's family came over, my grandfather came from a grape-growing area, and he grew grapes. It was 1906 when he first came into the valley, and they started the winery by 1915. But because of Prohibition they ended up leaving the wine business and going into other ag industries.

Napa Valley at the time was growing not just grapes but many other ag crops, so my family was typical. Other crops

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[1]This symbol, ##, indicates beginning or end of a tape or a tape interruption.

prevailed and most of the grapes were pulled. They planted primarily prunes. However, over the many years that they had this property--this was my grandparents' property--they commercially grew squash, potatoes, tomatoes, hay crops, and many other ag products. Stone fruits--there were cherries and peaches. Just about the works. People nowadays don't even realize that the Napa Valley is just a good region for growing most anything agriculturally. It just seems that it is specifically perfect for wine grapes.

If we're producing a Cabernet Sauvignon under the Caymus label, and it's our Napa Valley bottling, we believe that it's eventually going to seek its own price level. In other words, we might ask more than what it's worth for a while, and it might be sold for less than what it's worth for a while, but typically there's a range that people relate to. There's a value--package, the type of wine it is, the quality of the wine--and you're going to end up selling wine at a certain price point.

I think that also goes with our agricultural industry in California. You find that, yes, for a period Napa was growing all types of other crops, but there were other parts of California that exceeded Napa Valley's production of all of those crops. However, other parts of California started out in grapes and found that it wasn't their forte. So over the years there has been this transition, namely because of the quality of the wines, and Napa has gone sole monoculture, grapes, because it was destined to happen sooner or later.

Hicke: So each area does what it does best?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. I don't think anyone in the Valley today would expect that Napa is going to change to another ag industry. We're in grapes, and this is forever. Maybe we are a step ahead of a lot of other wine-growing communities because of that. There are a lot of good wine-growing communities in the state of California up and down the coast, but they're new. Sonoma [County] certainly is not new; it's just much bigger and doesn't have a picturesque valley which is only three or four miles wide and thirty miles long. Sonoma County is very sprawling, with hilly areas, so you can get into one area that is pretty, and the next one is let go. I think part of Napa Valley's preference is pictorial; it's something people like to remember.

Hicke: This agricultural specialization is probably the same sort of thing that happened in Europe over the centuries, and here it has taken place over a few decades.

C.J. Wagner: That's right. Not that long ago, your folks and mine came from Europe. They started growing grapes, and it didn't matter where they were, because they knew that was what grew--at least those families who were in grapes in Europe. So, yes, this is something that is very young here. We're such a young industry, it's hard to believe we've gone as far as we have.

Hicke: Did you have neighbors that you recall?

C.J. Wagner: Oh, sure. I feel as though we had a lot of neighbors that were old family friends, old-timers in the valley. They didn't grow primarily grapes; in many cases they were prune growers or what-have-you. It was just an ag community that people made a living by. My childhood memories are of having those old fellows come over, sitting down and talking to my dad about what the problems of the day were, and they certainly weren't about grapes. My images of childhood are not going out in the vines with my dad so much as they are running through the orchards. As he drove along the perimeter, I'd run through the orchard. My mom and dad would be driving along the side...those are really vivid memories. Or the prunes in bloom. So it was quite a bit different.

Old-timers in the Wine Industry: André Tchelistcheff and George Deuer

C.J. Wagner: I could tell you a few stories about the old-timers who came around. One of the biggest names, dean of winemakers in California, is André Tchelistcheff. André worked at Beaulieu Vineyard and made wines along with another fellow there. André's name was not nearly as big as it is now. He was kind of a wild cross between French and Russian--we weren't quite sure what he was--but he was quite an individual, quite a character. He would come out to the vineyard, just to the south of our property, which used to be Beaulieu Vineyard, and he would drive fast. Around here none of the growers likes to drive fast, because if you get a lot of dust on your grapevines it doesn't help them out, because the natural things just don't happen as far as photosynthesis. Also, dust hosts mites, so you end up with a mite problem on top of it all.

People would get upset about it, but André would always go out there and drive fast to make a lot of dust. He'd rationalize this by saying that there was a Rutherford dust

component; the dust was good to a point. He was also a guy who was generally very friendly and fairly close to the family. Although they didn't visit socially, he would come over during the daytime, and he would never knock; he would just walk in the door and start yelling, "Charlie, Lorna." I do remember that. It was a different way of doing things. These were his mannerisms, and we didn't like or dislike them; it was André.

Hicke: Did he give your dad some advice on grape growing?

C.J. Wagner: He may have been asking advice. [laughter] But, yes. I think usually it was just because we were neighbors: "What are you going to do here? When? Why?" Or, "I'm going to have a tractor come in. Do you want to use the same tractor?" Typically it was whatever farming neighbors would be talking about.

Hicke: That's interesting. I don't think I've ever talked to anyone who might have given advice to André Tchelistcheff.

C.J. Wagner: It's like me or my dad or André--certainly André has come so far in this industry that one has to realize that much of what he's learned is through all the bumps and bruises along his path. I guess these were the days of his bumps and bruises. We're not born to know everything, and you certainly can't get an education and learn in four or six years all about winemaking. It just goes against nature. If you're going to be successful at whatever you do, you're going to be successful.

I can think of another fellow who is somewhat of an old-timer here, who has since passed away. His name is George Deuer. George was winemaker at Inglenook, I think from 1936 to 1963. He was of German or Alsatian descent, and because my family were of much the same descent, they were friends, and he would always visit. After he had retired and we had gone into the first years of business here in winemaking commercially, George would come, and we would talk to him. I have to say that my first year of winemaking, which was in '72, the first year of the winery, George helped me at least as much as my dad. His ideas were more on the commercial side: how to move wine and what pump to use, how not to aerate wine, how to do some chemical analysis and add sulfurs--the sorts of things that really helped me out, all areas that my dad seemed to be lacking in.

Hicke: Technology?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, the more technical area. George kind of filled that gap.

Hicke: Would he just wander in and help you out?

C.J. Wagner: At the beginning we ran both the vineyard and the winery. The winery was very small; we had crushed only forty tons the first year. That means that I worked maybe two days in the winery and three weeks in the vineyard; so primarily we were out in the vineyard. By the way, during 1972, 1973, and 1974, my father, myself, and one other fellow pruned all of our vineyard, which took four months a year for those years.

I would have a list of questions, and George would sit down and say, "This is how it is." Certainly I was blind. I had only helped my dad as a child bottling wine. I tried to drink some but didn't really like it much until I was sixteen or eighteen. I was writing down notes, and I had no idea what the foundation was. I kind of learned the technical end before I found the foundation. I think it was good; I don't think that was bad.

Childhood and Education

C.J. Wagner: Nowadays it's kind of neat to be a winemaker (which I want to talk about, too). To be in the wine business is okay, to be in agriculture in Napa Valley is okay. But back in those days it wasn't. I mean by that that in my childhood years I was not particularly proud of what my father did. He was a farmer, and at the time--this is the fifties--farming was going through some rough times. The farmer had fallen in his importance in our social levels. I guess my point is that you would probably prefer your father to be a truck driver or anything else besides a farmer.

Those are the days I grew up in, so I didn't learn a lot about the industry at the time. I've got my own kids now, two boys aged eleven and thirteen, and a daughter age six. Both boys are working here during the summer. They already have a foundation. They already know how you check the ripeness. They tended a four-acre piece for me this year to pull off extra clusters. They know that the sugar comes up, and we pick the grapes at a certain ripeness level. They're not really quite clear on that, but they know how to crush, what fermentation is, what yeast is and how it works. Secondary fermentation they have a blurry idea of. "And then

we just put this stuff in barrels and wait." [laughter] There's a lot of stuff in between, but they have a grasp on the foundation, which I did not, partly due to the fact that they are proud of what their father does. Now it's okay; things have changed. It's probably just cyclical; it's probably going to change again. It was a very important part of what I used to worry about.

Hicke: Where did you go to grade school?

C.J. Wagner: All my schooling was in St. Helena--elementary, junior high school, and high school. My high school class was small, 120 students.

Hicke: What kinds of things did you like about school?

C.J. Wagner: I got involved in sports.

Hicke: Football?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. It doesn't seem like it was that long ago, but I think we went to school more to have fun than to study. I think a lot of us would probably admit that certainly that was the case. Particular interests? I don't think I had any other than being in sports. I did not like history, which is something my dad always liked and which he found surprising. Now I like history.

Hicke: I can tell he likes it, because he has told me the story about naming the winery and things like that. Did you have anybody who was particularly influential in either your school or your family?

C.J. Wagner: No. [laughs] I was never really driven by any single person. I'm going to say that there were the few people to really opened my eyes to different wines that I didn't know. I didn't know how good wines could be. Robert Stemmler worked for a couple of years as a consultant for us in about '73 or '74, just for a short period. He didn't do much; he was mainly a chemist. I remember he brought some sweet German wine, very expensive, probably some Berenauslese or something like that, and also some Pinot Noir, French Burgundy, which I don't think I had had previously. These wines were super.

Also at that time Spring Mountain Vineyards was really a highlight winery. So I remember tasting the wines that Bob brought, European wines, and also the Spring Mountain wines, which I thought were extraordinary. I thought to myself, "If

we could ever make wines like this, I would be happy." We would never, ever achieve the reputation of Spring Mountain, for sure, I figured; that would never happen. But I figured that if we could ever make wines like that, or if we could make one sweet wine like Bob had brought--if we could just make one in a lifetime, wouldn't it be something to make something so great?

Hicke: That established a goal for you?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. More than people, I think I had wines for goals.

Hicke: Getting back to school, you played football for St. Helena?

C.J. Wagner: Yes.

Hicke: Any other sports?

C.J. Wagner: No. I was just a jock. I was the captain of the team for both track and football for my sophomore and senior years. Then I started college. I started at Napa Community College, and I played football there, of course.

CAYMUS VINEYARDS

Starting the Winery

C.J. Wagner: I hadn't been there more than two months when my dad came to me with the offer that he wanted to build a winery. He wanted to get the family back into commercial business in a small way. If I was interested, then we'd do it; if I wasn't interested, then we wouldn't. At the time, I think he was considering selling the property.

Hicke: What prompted him to consider this path?

C.J. Wagner: As I said, we had prunes. I know that another part of California is responsible for driving Napa Valley out of the prune business. The prunes were pulled, Prohibition was gone, and the natural thing to get back into was grapes. Dad had pulled the prunes in the mid-sixties, and he planted Cabernet Sauvignon, Johannisberg Riesling, and Pinot noir. Those vines were just coming into production in about 1970 or '71. He was fetching good prices selling the grapes elsewhere, and I think the light came on: "If I'm getting these prices for these grapes, and the winery wants them again next year at a higher price, then maybe I should look into producing some wine from these grapes myself."

It was the same thing that happened to my grandfather. He planted grapes from 1906 to 1907 and started the winery in 1915, because the vineyards had come into production, and he probably thought he could make some good wines from it. My dad had planted the grapes in the mid-sixties, and by '71 felt that he should possibly get back into the commercial business.

Hicke: That's an interesting parallel.

C.J. Wagner: My dad may not have said this to you, but he always made wine all his life. As a child, I used to drink these old wines

because they were old, they were special. I didn't like them very much.

Hicke: What do you mean by old?

C.J. Wagner: He'd bring out wine from the forties and fifties, and by the time I was working here in '71, we were drinking the 1950s and 1960s wines, just typical food wines. I began to appreciate good wine. They were delicious. Mainly Pinot Noir is what he made, and that's why he planted Pinot noir out here.

Hicke: He said he liked Pinot Noir.

C.J. Wagner: He did, and he liked Riesling, too. When my grandmother's place was sold in 1963, his home barrels were brought into this room here. So right here is where we had barrels, and we had empty cases upstairs and the full cases over there. We'd be right here on the floor, bottling one-by-one, filling each bottle with a little hose.

My dad had built a reputation over those many years, since the twenties, as one of the best, and in many eyes *the* best, home winemaker in the Napa Valley.

Hicke: He didn't tell me that.

C.J. Wagner: He has skill, and it hasn't changed. We did pick up some technology along the way, but all the wines--and when we speak of red wines especially--are made exactly the way he made them. They're fermented with the same yeast, we use the same temperatures, we pick pretty much in the same realm of ripeness, they're put into barrels and aerated with the same techniques. Even to date we don't use a pump to pump out barrels. When you have a barrel full of wine, one of your choices is to get a pump, stick a gooseneck, or a pipe, down to the bottom, turn on the pump, and it sucks it out. At the same time, you usually get a charge of air that goes through, and the pump will drive air into the wine. If it's a certain type of pump, it can shear the wine particles in the wine itself, along with oxidation.

My dad would siphon, which is to stick a hose down a barrel, suck on it to get the siphon going, and then go from one barrel to the next. We use this same technique, except we don't suck on it anymore. We have a racking station that is probably like none other, where we bring a forklift in, pick the barrels up, and siphon; we siphon all the barrels. So fermentation techniques, aeration, racking, and production

techniques in general have all followed suit with what my father did years before we were commercial.

Hicke: How did he develop these techniques?

C.J. Wagner: I think it was, again, just the bumps and bruises. You just talked to people when you had dinner with somebody, or whatever. Besides that, these are not hard to learn. This is typical from his homeland in Europe. These techniques were used forever and ever, for maybe two hundred years by my family.

Hicke: So your dad came to you with this offer. How did you feel about it?

C.J. Wagner: I didn't have a lot of direction. I wasn't really enthused about the school I was going to, and I was not impressed by the viticulture I was taking down there, that's for sure. It was really a poor program--not that that needs to be said.

Hicke: You had already started thinking about viticulture?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, I had, and I was in chemistry, and I didn't mind that. I took the offer with the idea that I'd try it, and I just dropped right out of school and went out pruning vineyard--just with a snap of the fingers. That was with my dad. I don't know if he was happy. I guess he was happy about it. We poured the slab for the new building on this first winery that we did ourselves. We did all the power and plumbing in this building, and then we had a carpenter come in and put the building up on it.

I remember that I had a friend come out who was the quarterback on the football team. He had tracked me down to find out where I was and what had happened to me. He walked up and said, "Wagner, what are you doing?" I said, "I'm going to try and work the ranch here and see what it's like." He said, "You're kidding." He just couldn't believe it. He got in his car, and he took off.

I talked to him about a year ago, and he had no idea that we had success in the wine business. He became a high school teacher and a coach, and that's what he is now. I talk to him about wine.

My father wanted to try this, but I'm not sure he thought the wine business a safe bet. I think that if he had built the winery and a year or two later been given an offer to sell it, he probably would have. I think he was tenuous

about the whole project. But our first wines got into the bottle. Although they weren't that great, they seemed to sell. Of course, they weren't selling for a lot of money, and the production was low, so it wasn't like we were filling a great, big pipeline with wine. It was just Pinot Noir and Johannisberg Riesling. Johannisberg Riesling was our first really--

Riesling

Hicke: Do you remember how many cases?

C.J. Wagner: I've got it in notes. I kept all the notes from all the years of winemaking. I think we had about 240 cases of Riesling. It was really heavyweight Riesling that was fermented without temperature control. It was fine for the first year, but it really oxidized after that. Riesling is a very delicate variety that you have to be very careful with. When my dad made Riesling in his home wine cellar, he made small lots, so the fermentation would never create a lot of heat, and it wasn't a problem. We went to 500-gallon tank fermenter in the first year of production, so it got pretty hot.

Hicke: Was there a lot of residual sugar?

C.J. Wagner: No, you'd make it bone dry and heavy. It ended up being somewhat like Freemark Abbey's at the time. It was a style of wine that there is none like produced nowadays. Who makes Riesling in Napa Valley? Nobody nowadays.

Hicke: It's hard to make it dry and have it come out right, isn't it?

C.J. Wagner: It's hard to make it dry and palatable. [laughter]

Hicke: Yes, that's what I understand.

C.J. Wagner: Rieslings are usually so delicate, fine, and usually sweet.

Hicke: That was obviously based on an Alsatian wine that he liked.

C.J. Wagner: Exactly. As a matter of fact, he had even imported some Alsatian wines in the mid-seventies, so we brought those in for a few years.

More on the Winery: the Building and the Equipment

Hicke: Let's back up just a little bit. You started out pruning, and you were building the winery. How did that go? Did it take you a long time to build it?

C.J. Wagner: I'm guessing that I went to work about November, and by the next September our building was up and ready.

Hicke: This was in '71 that you started?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. Our first production year was in September of '72.

Hicke: What were you doing after you put the building up?

C.J. Wagner: I just did whatever there was to do around here, I guess. We bought used barrels; we started off the winery with used barrels.

Hicke: That's interesting. Where did you get the barrels?

C.J. Wagner: The 53-gallon American oak barrels were from Beaulieu. There were also quite a few puncheons from Inglenook, which were 133 gallons to 147 gallons. Some of those were European woods, but it didn't really matter, because they were old barrels, and there was no wood left in them. They were just vessels to hold and age wine.

I took care of the vineyard, and vineyard work goes year around, just about. I guess I just got into doing everything. I'd run to Berkeley to buy cheap vineyard rope. I'd do some phone work to find out where I should purchase goods at the best price. There were certain pieces of equipment that we needed for vineyard operations, so we would get into that, find out what the different ones were, and then plan on one or another.

Hicke: What about equipment for the winery?

C.J. Wagner: Equipment for the winery has been pretty basic. I think the Compleat Winemaker just started business about then, and I think we bought our first crusher from them. It's been a successful business as a winery equipment supplier out of St. Helena. We may have been his first sale. It seems to me he told me that. I think we bought the first Howard press he ever sold, that was for sure.

Our equipment was really basic, and we picked in boxes the first year. We just dumped the boxes into a little hand crusher, and the hand crusher was over the fermenter. We had three redwood open-top tanks, one old one from Inglenook and two new ones, and that's what we did our red fermentations in. I'd climb up on a plank on top of the tanks and punch down.

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C.J. Wagner: It was just like a home winery, a little bit bigger than a garage winemaker. It was nothing special.

The Mid-Seventies: Progress

C.J. Wagner: Things progressed, and we did sell wine. When we began to sell wine, the interest level went up, and as the interest level went up I was prouder of what I was doing. The mid-seventies were a transition time from vineyard to the wine business. As far as how I felt about farming as a child, I felt just as poorly about a small family wine business trying to compete in the real world of wineries, against Inglenook, Beaulieu, et cetera. This was not always welcomed in the valley itself. Maybe in the cities people thought, "Gosh, who is this little guy?" Just like a home brewer is now, compared to Budweiser; it's kind of an interesting parallel. I felt as though we were such a little guy, and some people thought, "What are you guys trying to do? You're trying to start a winery?" Although most of them probably wanted to try it, you know. There's a certain spirit involved and a certain competition that creates jealousy.

The mid-seventies were real formative years in that we began to sell wine, and we already started to establish ourselves as a good wine producer. That changed my outlook. It certainly took my total interest. All of my interest went towards grapes and wine production at the time. I'd say I was probably flailing for the first two or three years, and then in the mid-seventies I hit midstream.

Tasting and Decisions

Hicke: Who made the tasting decisions and so forth on the winemaking?

C.J. Wagner: We always did that together, as we do today, including whoever happens to be working for us at the time. It's always been my father and myself and one or two others.

Hicke: Who else might be involved?

C.J. Wagner: It could have meant that George Deuer was involved. Bob Stemmler was involved to a point for two years. We had a fellow from Davis who worked for us for nine years. Although he wasn't an enologist, he had a good friend in enology. Randy Dunn was his name and he was part of our tasting and decision making. During the time Randy Dunn was here, we no longer had any help as far as chemistry from either George or Bob. We were a threesome that worked very well together. We kind of piloted the wines more towards the market than our own personal taste.

Hicke: Which was what?

C.J. Wagner: We had some changes in production. I mentioned that we use the same techniques as my father used, but one major difference that we've developed is the use of new wood barrels, because that's something that my dad had never dealt with before. We dealt enough in that area to know that we know what sort of wood character wine should have for the type of wine it is. If it's an enormous wine, it can handle an enormous amount of wood. There's no such thing as too much wood for the wine; there's just not enough wine for the wood.

That threesome lasted pretty well. In about 1982 or '83, we took on our first sales and marketing person, and we got him involved in our winemaking as far as tastings go.

Hicke: Who was that?

C.J. Wagner: John Skupny. Now we no longer have three people [tasting]. We probably have five people, which includes sales and marketing, our white-wine maker, myself, and my father. I'm primary, in that I'll form all the red wines into a direction, but when the final blends come in, I would prefer to do my best at it and then to involve more people for more input. I think that's a real healthy way to run our

business. The primary reason for my saying that is that a lot of people don't run their businesses that way, and I see failures. You find these winemakers who have far-fetched ideas and directions which aren't possibly the best for the market. It's their own personal taste that they are having involved in this.

Our white-wine maker loves wines--red wines, too. We have my father, myself, Jeffrey Friedman is our marketing guy, and Rod Rowe takes care of the barrel room; he does all the racking for me and blending and that sort of thing. I like this. It's a consortium that really works, and it certainly enthuses anyone who works around the winery to know that they have had a part of how something tastes. That's a real important part.

Hicke: You're saying that the wines are improved by having several different opinions other than your own, and that people can go wrong when they just rely on one person's individual taste?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. I think there has been a lot of that. Many winemakers who actually bottle wines under their own personal flavor, so to speak, don't have as much success. Also, if I make a blend that I think is the best wine I've ever tasted in my life, and my dad doesn't like it, we say that he has the power of veto. If he says no, it doesn't get bottled that way; we change something. But typically we always get along real well. We've had just a little things--I mean, after this many years of working with him, I know exactly what he's going to say about every wine. [laughter] I know more about that than I do about the wines themselves.

Developing One's Palate

Hicke: One thing I'm interested in is how one develops one's palate? You've obviously learned this from scratch.

C.J. Wagner: The way I've done it is just through practice. You just do it so much. People will say that Cabernet smells like green olives and has a somewhat herbaceous flavor and richness of chocolate and tea, and whatever else might be involved.

Hicke: Yes.

C.J. Wagner: And Sauvignon Blanc has those vegetal edges to it. When I taste Cabernet, it tastes like Cabernet, and when I taste Zinfandel, it tastes like Zinfandel. So I have developed a direct link to the way wines taste, and I don't grasp onto any of those other flavors and so forth that people recognize as Cabernet. In other words, if you had a blind glass of wine, you might smell it and say, "Green olives," and you might taste it and say, "It tastes herbaceous." I want to say, "This is a Cabernet." To me, when.I smell it, it smells and tastes like Cabernet.

Hicke: So you have a memory picture of Cabernet as a whole?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, and of the other varietals that we deal with. Definitely. I developed that ten years ago, and since then I've developed further--I can taste wines from another area, and I know a lot of other people can do this as well. I can taste wines from Santa Barbara or Paso Robles. I may be wrong sometimes, but generally speaking I'm not. You can develop those sorts of tasting techniques. It's part memory and part trial and error and practice. We've been doing it so damned long.

Hicke: But it's amazing to me that you can develop that kind of sensory perception.

C.J. Wagner: Never would I have imagined that I could taste wine like I do. I'm really amazed at that. Now I'm just hoping it doesn't go away. [laughter] They say that your palate does lessen as you age. But there's no doubt about André Tchelistcheff; we haven't heard about how he's tasting lately, but he can still taste. And my dad certainly knows absolutely what's good and what's bad, no doubt about it. I'm just hoping that I retain it.

I think you would find that many other winemakers agree with me. Whatever way you learn to make wine--whether you go to school or you don't, or whether you are tutored--it takes a certain number of years beyond that point to where you really feel safe about what you are doing, about how wines taste, and about what you're really trying to develop as far as end product, what you want your wines to taste like. Instead of varying with the market demands, which over the years have gone from high-alcohol, late-harvest Zins that you can't even find nowadays to White Zinfandels, you need to find a point and go for it. We've done that, but it takes a good period of time for a winemaker to get to that point.

Let's just say that you are thirty-five. If you are thirty-five, and you know what you are doing, you are a very young winemaker who knows what he is doing. If you're going to work until you are fifty or fifty-five as a winemaker, it's only going to give you twenty chances, twenty years, twenty winemaking vintages, to do your best.

Hicke: Is fifty or fifty-five a normal--?

C.J. Wagner: I use that figure because most winemakers that age seem to take a back seat, and somebody new comes on board. Maybe the new run of winemakers will go to an older age.

Hicke: That's true in the management of the winery, but that doesn't mean that they lose their palate or change their palate, does it?

C.J. Wagner: No, I'm talking about winemaking itself. For the average winemaker, you have twenty chances to put [wine] onto a table. I'm guessing that would be an average for a winemaker. We as winemakers are not happy that harvest only comes around once a year. If you had the chance to make it any time you wanted, and you had lots going all year long, you would end up with all kinds of knowledge, and your techniques would obviously change.

So it's a very long, drawn-out affair. In our whole production of the wine business here, we have hired people from other industries who come in. When you have an idea in another industry, you can usually apply it within a few weeks or months, or within a year anyway. In the wine industry, if you have an idea you can apply it, but if you're going to start from ground planting to bottle, you're talking seven or eight years. People find this rate of life so slow when they come from another industry.

Hicke: That's a very interesting insight that is unique to the wine industry.

C.J. Wagner: It really is. I think it's good, and it's bad. It's good for people, and I think it's one of the reasons people like the idea of the lifestyle, that you have certain things that happen all the way through the year; and then here's September and October, and you've got the harvest, and everything can be wonderful. There's this image that is just great. Then we start to talk about business: "We need to make a change here. The change is going to happen in about three years." "Oh, okay." It really slows down the beat of the typical businessman.

Hicke: You've given me a lot of good insight about palate development, which is kind of hard to explain.

Growth in the 1970s

Hicke: Let's do a little more chronology, and then maybe we can talk about some specific topics like pests. Were you hiring more people and increasing your production?

C.J. Wagner: Are we currently?

Hicke: Starting in '72, did you gradually increase your production?

C.J. Wagner: In 1972 and '73 we were fairly small in production, but we were looking forward in 1974 to a year when we were expecting to receive lower prices for the grapes. I don't remember precisely what had happened to make us feel this way, but I'll use this year as an example. Gallo has always been the guy who comes out with the prices, and Gallo came out with his prices about a month ago. I'll ask my dad to clarify this, but probably we heard the first of August that Gallo was going to be paying $600 a ton, and it was $900 a ton the year prior. We saw this big decrease in what we were going to receive. We were selling grapes to Inglenook, and all the wineries followed suit to Gallo's pricing for the most part.

So we were faced with low prices in grapes. We had also gotten our first wines onto the market and saw that they sold and seemed to sell well and easily, much more profitably than growing grapes alone. In 1974 we opted to keep more fruit at home and sell less. Well, 1974, as we all know, maybe wasn't the best year of the century, but it was one of those real eye-opening years for Napa Valley. People were calling it the year of the decade.

Hicke: For wine?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, and especially for Cabernet. For us to have a large bottling in 1976, when we bottled the wine, it was great to have a whole lot of this 1974 spectacular vintage wine. That really put us at a better pace. Our wine out of '75 was even better than '74, and so on. So we did increase production, and as we increased production we put a few extra people on, but never did we ever get to where we were hiring more than one person a year. We have twenty-three employees, and that

includes my dad and me, and we've been in business about twenty-two years.

During that time we saw bigger production, and we felt the label wasn't right and could afford to go to a professional and have a new label made. We had a new label made for the Caymus product starting about that time. The first label we had used I drew up. My father did not believe that packaging was very important.

Hicke: That was Sebastian Titus who designed the label?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. That was $500 for the label. [laughs] Now it would be $20,000. Titus really liked the wines, and I think part of his spirit was that he wanted to help these guys out who are starting in the wine business. Speaking of palates, that guy had a wonderful palate. He was a label designer, but he really had a good palate, and we spent a lot of time together drinking and tasting.

Lorna Wagner's Contributions

C.J. Wagner: Over these last twenty-two years, the whole family has been involved. I don't talk about my mom much, but for the first twenty years she was involved in all that dirty work that somebody had to do.

Hicke: I'd like to hear a little bit about what she did.

C.J. Wagner: She did all the book work. She wasn't an accountant, and we would take the book work to the accountant. But she would do billing, accounts receivable, and what-have-you. She would hand-label, capsule, bottle. She was busy doing all that stuff. All industries have spotlight people, and I certainly don't want to be the spotlight person so much as some of the people who work in the cellars who are so good and have so much to do with the quality as well. I hate to belittle them. I think my mom gets belittled just because she wasn't a winemaker.

Hicke: She did everything.

C.J. Wagner: We had family arguments for the first many years. We'd never agree on anything--what bottle we were going to go into, what label we wanted to develop, what capsules, what corks.

Hicke: Did she have a say in all that?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, no doubt. There was kind of a threesome argument between my mom, my dad, and myself. It only took about ten years to get that under control. [laughter] My dad is not known as the easiest guy to get along with. He's a real character, and he's full of spit and vinegar. That's Charlie Wagner, and that's typical of most farmers. I don't know if you know that, but farmers and ranchers live life on their own, and they depend on themselves. When they have something to do with running it, that's the way it's going to get done.

Hicke: You have to have a lot of resilience and endurance to be a farmer, I think.

C.J. Wagner: Yes, and I think stubbornness comes along with it naturally. I recall many times just biting my lip and not saying more than I should, and I persevered through the family arguments. I still see today that arguments happen within families in the wine business, and first thing you know, they're no longer together. I did persevere, and if I should get any blue ribbon, it is for biting my lip. Looking back, it's all fun and games, but there were very serious feelings at the time that we all had.

Hicke: Those are the ways that you arrived at your goals and your decisions. It was necessary to go through some of that, I think.

C.J. Wagner: I guess that's it.

My mother was instrumental in many things. Also, she cooked lunch for my dad and me--and this was after I got married. We'd go to work, we'd come in for lunch, and we'd go back to work. So it was my dad and I and my mother. Then there was another employee, and another employee, and so on. By 1980 or so, we had ten or twelve people who were eating lunch at her table every day, six days a week.

Hicke: She deserves a gold medal.

C.J. Wagner: Finally it was just too much, and we said, "Hey, everybody is going to start bringing lunches. It's been a good time, but it's time to change." So we did. I even brought a lunch for years because it just wouldn't look right otherwise.

Hicke: Did your mother cook German dishes?

C.J. Wagner: We would have German-type cold cuts and stinky cheese. That was always the big thing. Usually people who were coming to work for us would walk in the first day and think, "Oh, boy, we're not eating this." But by the time they had worked here for a year, they loved it. It's easy to acquire the taste for some of that stuff. It seems so off kilter at first, but so delicious it can be. Head cheese, pigs feet, red cabbage, and liederkranz. I was raised eating that all the time.

Yes, a lot of German influence in her cooking, so it wasn't just cold cuts. Typically we'd have a lot of fresh vegetables off of our property. All summer there would always be sliced tomatoes and onions, and people would put them in sandwiches. She would also have a hot dish. She'd always make some kind of salad, whether it was bean, stringbean, a green salad, or a potato salad. She'd always have something like that, and she still does that.

My mom and dad still work a lot doing fruits and vegetables, and canned tomatoes and peaches. My mom makes the best tomato juice you ever had in your life. I'm going to try and get my wife to learn how to make it this year. It's one of my goals. [laughter] It's so good. I'm involved with her tomato-juice tasting, whether we've got enough salt, pepper, hot chilies, and whatever else goes into it.

Managing the Business

C.J. Wagner: We all did all the work. I did everything. I even did sales for a while. All the way through from that to the paper work to the bottling to buying whatever for farm and/or winery needs, all the way up to office manager, which I pulled away from about four years ago. My forte was not office manager. I was managing people who knew a lot more about how to do things than I did, and I thought, "This is great. We'll just put crews in and let them do it," but we had some real problems develop working that way. We ended up hiring a controller, and he ended up being the in-house accountant along with office manager, which was really good. More strife in my life was caused through that type of office, trying to get the office to run correctly, than anything else.

Hicke: You not only had to learn to make the wine but to manage the business.

C.J. Wagner: Yes, and to make everybody work without raising tempers.

Hicke: How to manage personnel.

C.J. Wagner: I know now; I know to stay away. [laughter] Over the last couple of years, I realized that there are people we can now afford to put on who know more and who will do a better job for us. We used to send out bills and not get money back, and sometimes at the end of the year you would look and just say, "My God, what did we do?" You sent somebody a bill eight or twelve months after the first one, and they'd say, "Listen, we don't know about this," and we wouldn't get paid. That was the kind of trash that was going on. It was all manual. So like most everyone else, we updated.

Hicke: Switched to computers and data banks?

C.J. Wagner: Sure, of course. All the goodies like that. We are running efficiently on that end, and I feel good about it. It has allowed me to work more in the cellar and learn more about the wines. The only thing that pulls me away from that is going on the road. If marketing really feels it's that important that I go on the road and do something, then I'll go do it. This year I'll be twenty-one days out, total, away from the winery. Next year I'd like to reduce it to twelve, because I know what I do best, and it's here.

Marketing

Hicke: Let's talk a little bit about sales and marketing and how that grew. You started out doing it yourself, you said, in the seventies. Then you hired a distributor?

C.J. Wagner: No, we hired an out-of-state broker for out of state, and we hired a broker for California. I think we had a good thing going at the time. The wines were respectable, the packaging was very good, the pricing was right. There was a value that always seemed to be associated with Caymus. It wasn't just quality; it was a value.

As far as pricing, we went along with the crowd, so to speak, seeing what the rest of the industry was doing.

Pricing

Hicke: I wanted to ask how you arrived at prices early on.

C.J. Wagner: That's an interesting story. When we started making Cabernet Sauvignon, the first Cabernet, the 1972 vintage, was $4.50. This was really a nice wine out of a poor vintage. It was by far the best '72 Cabernet Sauvignon that I had ever tasted. By 1973, I think we were $5.50 a bottle. My dad would have people come, and they would either come into this room or go over to the winery. They'd buy six bottles or a case of wine. They would ask questions, and my dad would answer candidly, "Well, there's no reason in the world why somebody shouldn't be able to make you, sell you, a fine bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon for $4.50." Those people would come back as our prices went up and haunt him, "Charlie, I was here, and do you remember that you told me that these other people were asking too much money, and that there's no reason why anyone should pay more than $4.50?" He really had to eat a lot of crow. [laughter] That was a running fear that he lived with, that those people would come back and haunt him.

Prices did go up. Everything got more expensive. I don't think that the first wines that we produced were realistically priced as far as the wine business goes.

Hicke: They were too low?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. My dad is a good businessman, but we didn't have an in-house accountant to tell us that there are a lot of costs you're missing here. Certainly he wasn't plugging in all the costs incurred to determine a bottle price.

Hicke: You determined those prices by cost?

C.J. Wagner: What he thought were costs, yes. I think in '74 it was $7.00 a bottle, and the wine was selling really well. At that time there were a few wineries beginning to start up. If I'm not mistaken, we were about the forty-first winery in Napa Valley in 1972. During the seventies we had all these people move into town. I don't know how many wineries we have now. Do we have 280 or something like that? Things really changed, and prices seemed to soar. We saw all around us our competition going way beyond what we were asking. Of course, it doesn't take much common sense to figure out that you should ask a little more, for two reasons. One is to be more profitable, and the other one is to create the right image.

For instance, if you make a great wine and sell it two bottles for $7, people are not going to recognize that. They won't appreciate it. We want to be on the tables along with the best wines of the world, whatever they are. If it's a Bordeaux that somebody in England is enjoying, we want the consideration of having some of the Caymus wine in their cellar. I'm not saying that price always goes along with image, but somewhat they follow suit. Right now we're in a day and age of value. Things have changed so much, and I think the best example of that is the Los Angeles area. Five or six years ago in the Los Angeles area it was the most expensive wine that would sell the fastest. It was people with money, and they wanted to outdo each other. Here we are, five years later, and what is selling in Los Angeles? They have the most successful discounting program--discounter markets--in the United States.

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C.J. Wagner: People in L.A. are no longer buying expensive wines so much as buying the cheapest wine and trying to almost take the screwdriver to somebody in order to get the wine cheaper. It has flip-flopped, and it is now very much a bargain market. It starts with the guys who buy the wine and ends with the consumer; they're all into this feeding frenzy of trying to get it cheaper. All the shop owners talk to each other and know what each is paying, and if somebody is getting a better deal, then the other guy gets all bent out of shape. Things have changed in Los Angeles enormously.

Also Los Angeles always seemed to be, and continues to be, the spawning ground of change in the wine industry. Whatever has happened historically in Los Angeles has happened in northern California a few years later, has happened across the states a few years thereafter. That's the market. What's happening is clubs, chains, and discounters. There are a few businessmen who are doing business as usual, still taking the normal profit, and people are still doing business with them because they feel that this guy gives them an honest shake. In Los Angeles most of the wines are being sold in two areas, discount and restaurants.

So our emphasis, of course, has shifted towards restaurants. We want more business in restaurants, and we're very fortunate that our name has come to be strong enough that most restaurants would like to have us on the wine list.

Hicke: I can tell you that in Stars [restaurant] in San Francisco they have not only your wine on the wine list, they have a huge box on the menu that says, "Caymus Vineyards." Have you seen that?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, "Special Selection Cabernet '88." That program has worked so well with Stars. Gosh, we should have given them the wine for all the good it has done us. That's a great deal. Stars is wonderful.

Evolution of the Distribution System

Hicke: As the seventies went along, how did you increase your sales and distribution nationwide?

C.J. Wagner: We had a broker. We broke off from the broker, and we got our first taste of business in the cold sense of the word, in that we got sued and had a real mess with him, because he had supposedly developed this market. We learned the hard way...no one told us ahead of time.

Hicke: There have been several of those, I think.

C.J. Wagner: Oh, yes, it's very popular now. We put into place our first full-time marketing person, John Skupny. John began to sell directly from the winery to distributors out of state on a more professional level. It worked out very well. We began to key into certain markets. We didn't try to go into fifty states, just to the key markets--and I don't want this to be taken wrong, but there are certain areas of the United States which are more inclined to have culture. Some cities don't have it, and some cities do. The northeast is full of culture. They've been living there for a hundred years longer than we've been living here, and maybe that's one reason. Wine has always been an important part of their food, for whatever reason, and as people came west across the states, wine kind of left the menu and beer or Coke became part of it. Massachusetts is our number three major market, the small state that it is. New York, New Jersey are also major markets.

I want all the world to enjoy Caymus wine, but obviously it's just going to go to the areas where people have a better understanding of wines.

Hicke: You don't make a million cases.

C.J. Wagner: That's right, we don't. We have weekly meetings on marketing, and we talk direction and that sort of thing. Day-to-day marketing I'm not that involved with.

Hicke: How about international sales?

C.J. Wagner: International sales are interesting, but I'm not enthused with them. I think Germany and Austria are pretty happy with California. We sell to Angelo Gaja in Italy, and they seem to be enthused. France, as you can imagine, is French wine. French people are French people, and they're never going to change.

We dropped out of selling to Japan three or four years ago and just recently shipped over some wines, a very small quantity of just our best. Our problem with Japan is that the people who are selling California wines into that country really have developed the wrong sort of image for California; it's not a great image. You find that the Japanese will buy the old standards, whether it's first growth Bordeaux, Grand Cru Burgundy, or the top Rieslings. Those are their standards, the ones most sought after. In Japan, most wine enthusiasts are not seeking California wines.

Hicke: They don't think of California as having fine wine?

C.J. Wagner: No, we're not in the same arena. I knew this was a problem, and we stopped sales. We just started selling again in very limited amounts, but we're just selling to these consumers who are up on the top. Our intention is to create image from the top down instead of from the bottom up. Rather than sell a hundred cases to Japan and have this image of being a sub-quality winery, we'd be better off selling ten cases and just getting into a few cellars of people who care about quality wine. That might develop into a hundred cases in five years or whatever, and that's all we can ask at this point.

Hicke: How about South America?

C.J. Wagner: We did sell some wine to Brazil just recently. I think it was an individual collector who just started a wine business there. Again, though, he seems to be running in a circle of people who know and enjoy wines, and that's what we really like. That's what excites me. If we bring someone in who wants to sell the wine, and he says, "I'm going to go to Ireland, and I'm going to sell the wine," we're not excited

about him going to Ireland unless all of a sudden he says, "We've got this wine tasting group, and we get together, and we love this wine and that wine." All of a sudden we get excited, because there are some people out there that are knowledgeable that we want to be associated with. That's more on a case by case study.

Hicke: Australia and New Zealand?

C.J. Wagner: No.

Hicke: They have quite a bit of wine of their own.

C.J. Wagner: Yes.

Hicke: How about the size of production? Has that increased? Did you level off?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, we have leveled off. Nineteen eighty-nine was our level-off year. We have twenty-three employees currently, and that's where we want to stay.

Hicke: How many cases do you produce a year?

C.J. Wagner: Between Caymus and Liberty School together, it's about 100,000 cases.

Hicke: Can you give me an approximate breakdown?

C.J. Wagner: About 60,000 Caymus and 40,000 Liberty School.

Hicke: Mostly Cabernet?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, mainly Cabernet. Our largest production is 30,000 cases of Napa Valley Cabernet.

Appellations

Hicke: That reminds me that I want to ask you about appellations. You just use a Napa Valley appellation, and I think your dad indicated that he wasn't enthusiastic about smaller ones.

C.J. Wagner: You mean sub-appellations in Napa Valley?

Hicke: Yes.

C.J. Wagner: I agree with him only to a point. He is for Napa Valley forever, and that's it. I do believe that we need to develop further, to come to sub-appellations. When you talk about Burgundies or whatever, you finally get down to the vineyard name, and they become more expensive. But you know you can trust that if what you want to taste is that vineyard, you can buy that wine. It may go to different producers, and you understand that one producer makes it a little differently than the others, but there's always the common soil or whatever the character is that comes from that vineyard.

I think those are important, but what's happening here, Carole, is that we have a lot of wineries that are in business, and they are becoming more professional as time goes on. What comes along with that are public relations people or marketing people who are using any angle they can. They are aware of the angle of the French single-vineyard appellation, and they are aware that there are collectors who are after that. Therefore, if they can utilize "sub-appellations," it gives them more marketing meat for the public relations department to work on, a nail to drive home as being better. This is where the Rutherford Bench comes from. Rutherford Bench is certainly just a handful of people who in some cases may believe that they have a special appellation, but for the most part believe that they will have more marketing clout if they were to pull this off.

Hicke: It seems to fit in with your philosophy of aiming at people who are knowledgeable. If you didn't care about people who were knowledgeable about wine, then Napa Valley is the best thing to call it.

C.J. Wagner: That's true, but let's say it's twenty years down the road from now. Over the twenty years we have finally pulled out every variety that doesn't belong on this land. We found out that Sauvignon blanc on the rich soils and Cabernet on the poor soils is our ticket, and there's a flavor that is associated with each of those varieties. We find that our neighbors are kind of finding out the same thing. I'm not saying it's going to happen in twenty years; it didn't happen in France in twenty years. It takes a long darn time.

Eventually there becomes a character and maybe even a style of wine that all of us are using around this little community here, and we name it the East Bench Rutherford. I just believe that currently it's premature for a sub-appellation. Secondly, we're upset that it's market-driven. It's public relations departments that are

the driving force behind the sub-appellations instead of quality of the wines.

Hicke: I'm glad you clarified that.

C.J. Wagner: It has to come from the land first for a certain number of years, until you can say, "You know, that's the way they taste around here, and yes, we could then use a sub-appellation. The soil is the same, the climate is the same, the grapes are pretty much the same varieties, and the wines taste similar; therefore, let's give it that." That makes sense. We do not have that, not yet. I'm for some appellations, but maybe in twenty years. Let these things develop.

Liberty School Label

Hicke: Tell me about the Liberty School label.

C.J. Wagner: My dad probably told you that he went to school there.

Hicke: Yes, he told me how he got the name.

C.J. Wagner: He said he was the sole graduate in the eighth grade class. The development of the label is something that happened in 1976. We were in business and were selling wine under the Caymus label, and we were confronted with some wine that we had found through Bob Stemmler. There was a certain Cabernet, bottle-ready, already barrel-aged, from Mill Creek Winery. It was for sale in bulk, and they wanted $3.50 a gallon. We tasted it, and we thought, "Man, this is really nice." It was much softer than ours, and it was a very appealing wine, a wonderful wine.

We wanted to do something with that, and we knew that we shouldn't use the Caymus label, because we didn't want to prostitute the name, so to speak. We wanted to keep Caymus associated with our own vineyard, and that was it, so we needed to come up with another label. We thought about Conn Creek Winery as a name, and we ended up with Liberty School as being a name and a picture. We had a drawing made of a picture of the school, and that was it.

We came out with our first Cabernet. When we came out with that wine, it was written up by some wine critics, and Robert Finnegan at the time gave it a high ranking. That

wine sold like wildfire. What did that do to us? We couldn't just leave well enough alone. We went ahead and searched the market for more, found more, and bottled it. That was Lot 2. For Lot 3 we actually started to bring in wines and barrel-age them. Then we began to buy more different wines from all over the state. We bought a lot of Cabernets out of Sonoma, Napa, Lake County, Paso Robles. We actually bought some out of Nevada City and other places.

We had such success with the Cabernet that we went into Chardonnay, because those two are partners. We began to purchase bulk Chardonnays and then blend them. Again, we worked all around the state.

My foundation is here at Caymus and in Napa. We know that our classic Cabernet from this area has a certain character to it, and we think that it is classic for the state.

Hicke: And you aim at consistency, I know, at Caymus.

C.J. Wagner: Yes, we do, but at the same time, through purchasing all these vines from outside of Napa Valley, had learned an awful lot about our state. We found out that, "Gosh, those guys down there do all right. Those guys up in Lake County--." You'd never think Lake County was a good producer of anything except pears, but there were some pretty nice Zinfandels and Cabernets that we found from there.

That really was the beginning of what we are doing today. Today we are no longer purchasing wines; we're purchasing grapes. We have long-term commitments on grapes from vineyards that we used to buy wines from. Now we've got a grower, and he's in Paso Robles. He's got three little vineyards there, and we pick the grapes, and have them made at a winery down in Monterey County. I oversee the vineyard operations to a certain point and also oversee the winemaking and barrel aging of those Cabernet wines under Liberty School.

What we're doing for Chardonnay is similar, but we're down in Santa Maria Valley in Santa Barbara County. We have been looking around in Monterey County as well. My point is that both labels, Cabernet and Chardonnay, are going to come from the Central Coast. We think Central Coast is really part of the future of the wine industry. It already is fairly hot, but I think it's going to become more of a major part of the wine industry. The wines are less expensive to produce and therefore to sell, and the styles, especially of

the Cabernet, are much softer and easier to enjoy at a young age. Our Cabernets are not. The '91 Liberty School Cabernet has been on the market for six months. The '91 Caymus Cabernet will be bottled next spring. So there's a big difference there. One is light, fruity, and berry-like, and the other one is dense, texturous, and classic.

Hicke: Do you aim at a consistency for Liberty School, too, or do you just try to make the best wine?

C.J. Wagner: This is the very beginning of the new Liberty School wines. Although we've been buying grapes and making the wine ourselves for a year and a half or so, right now is still just the beginning of Liberty School. I think we're going to see quite a transition to a certain style that people can expect from it, year in and year out. The Cabernet is always going to be very fruity, berry-like, a nice, easy drinking wine and not something you'd want to age. I think those are going to be typical features on that wine, and I think the Chardonnay goes the same way.

But it's the wine business, and it takes years to do anything, right? This is a change that is going to take place over the next several years.

Hicke: Are there some key personnel here at the winery who have been here for a long time?

C.J. Wagner: Our white-wine maker. I make reds, and we have another fellow who makes white wines. He's been here for nine years.

Hicke: Did you give me his name before?

C.J. Wagner: No, I didn't. His name is Jon Bolta, and he's one of the fellows that we taste with. Jon is very much a big part of the winery here in winemaking. I guess he's been here longer than most everyone else.

Cooperage

Hicke: What about the changes in cooperage? Can you tell me a little bit about how you started out?

C.J. Wagner: I have done some market traveling and traveling to see what they do in Europe as far as winemaking and that sort of

thing. We have been more than once and have visited facilities of barrel producers that we buy from.

Hicke: One was Saury, which I have never heard of.

C.J. Wagner: We've been buying from him just a dribble at a time for the last several years.

Hicke: He's French?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. This year we changed, because he is doing a certain technique that we asked for; so we tried twenty barrels from him. The standard barrels have been Demptos, made in Napa; François Freres and definitely Nadalie, always a standard for us. We have tried all the others, but those are the standards for us. We buy a lot of barrels.

I'd also like to say that one of my claims to fame is that I've been to Missouri more than I've been to France, and I go back there to work with American wood producers. They have come to grips with how we are going to make American barrels better, at least for Caymus. It has worked out really well. We're working with two producers. Our largest producer is the one we've been going back and seeing the most of. We're working with air-dried wood versus kiln-dried: should we go six months air-dried or two years air-dried, or is there a difference? It's another long-term experiment. We've been working on this for five years, and it's working out really well.

Hicke: Who are those barrel makers?

C.J. Wagner: Independent Staves in Missouri and Canton Cooperage in Kentucky.

Hicke: So you are getting made-to-order barrels?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, we are. I go back there and go on the floor; it's much like an automotive assembly line. Our barrel producers are different than French barrel producers where a cooper makes one barrel--makes all the different components, puts it together, and puts his name on it. Here it's more like a machine, each worker on a separate job as the barrel moves automatically through the facility.

Hicke: An assembly line?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, it's an assembly line, and we're trying to plug into their line all the features that we think are mandatory for

good oak barrels. I have been there at the factory at 5:00 in the morning, the fires are going, and they're ready to go. I walk in the door, and they see this guy from California.

I have to tell you about the first time. I got there, and it was snowing. I was staying at a condominium about fifteen miles away, and it took me quite a bit longer than I expected to get there. The line was ready to go, and there must have been sixty guys on the line. I walked in the door, and everybody was ready and waiting, and they had been there ready and waiting.

They all knew I was from California, and if you're from California, there's just a little something wrong with you. [laughter] You're not quite all there, or you're a leaf-eater, or God knows what you are. I put that beside me, and I went to the end of the line and talked to the production manager. We had already talked the day previous about what we were going to do. We started the line out, and the barrels started to come around to the fires. I hung around the fires, the area I felt needed most attention. I pulled the first barrel off and did this treatment that I do to barrels, and the inside of the barrel caught on fire. In other words, I ruined the barrel.

So we went back to the typical high-toast that they were doing, I took another barrel and toasted it, and it caught on fire. I burned three barrels in about forty-five minutes, and they all saw this happen. It was the best thing that could ever happen, because it really broke all the tension; they knew that I really wasn't worth the poor consideration they had given me, and maybe I was a good ol' boy like them. That was the feeling that came about, and it was really good.

I messed up three barrels, but the whole production was close to the toast level that I was trying to get. On subsequent trips we ended up finally getting to the toast level that I wanted. It was just that we were getting the barrels too hot at that point; they were too close to flash point. The barrels that I'm used to working with, which are French, are typically not quite that hot, and I can do my last-fire treatment that I like to do without them catching on fire. The production manager there felt that he had to get them that hot; otherwise they weren't going to want to bend. We've come to grips with that.

Back to that first day, we ended up going out to dinner that night with the sales people, the production manager, and

the man under him. First thing you know, we had become friends. I even drank Wild Turkey and ginger ale, which I had never had before. He obliged me by drinking wine with dinner, so we had this drink afterwards. We were breaking ice.

The next day I went out on the floor there and got to know a few of the guys, and now they all feel that I'm not just a leaf-eater from California. That really helped. I've been to Missouri five times, working with them. It's worked out really well.

Hicke: They know you are a real person, too, and not just somebody out there sending requirements.

C.J. Wagner: That's right. Although I make the red wines here, and it has worked out to a good degree on the red wines, it just so happens that the American barrels that we've been producing back there have worked out perfectly for the whites. Jon Bolta uses entirely those barrels now. I don't believe that American barrels are quite up to the French in the red wine department, but I think in some varieties they can work all right. If it's Petite Sirah or Zinfandel, it is maybe even better in American wood. For Cabernet it can be a blend of American and French. Certainly people break rules all the time. The oak we use primarily is American. But Pinot Noir and American wood just don't go together. Those are the sorts of things we are still finding out.

Our Caymus barrel-fermented Sauvignon Blanc is our largest-production white wine at 16,000 cases. It sells well, people like it; it's a wonderful wine, and it's 100 percent American wood. So I feel that we are doing something for our country at the same time. Fifteen years ago we bought American barrels, but they weren't the same. The coopers were just making a whiskey barrel at the time. It was kiln-dried, and they would not burn the inside at all; they would just put the barrel together. We'd get it, and we used to say it tasted like white shoe polish. It had a really strong, terrible, dill quality. Nowadays we have more interesting winemaking and less interest in spirits, and the barrel producers have seen that. They say, "The graphs show that you are getting bigger, and these other guys are getting smaller, so we're going to start listening to you." So we've come of age; the timing is right.

Hicke: You're not only buying American, you have really helped develop an industry. Other people, I'm sure, are going to use them, after they have learned from you.

C.J. Wagner: That's true.

Other Equipment

Hicke: What about corks? Is that a problem for you?

C.J. Wagner: It's nothing more than a cost problem, I think.

Hicke: Closures?

C.J. Wagner: We're going to stay with corks for now. I don't know what the future holds. I think still today if you pay for your corks, you're going to get a good cork. But they do cost so darned much. Our Special Selection corks are fifty-eight cents each. We're getting the tops--fifty-four millimeter--and they're beautiful. The last time I had a corky bottle of Special Selection--I'll tell you, I haven't had one for four years.

Vineyard Changes and Experiments: Trellising

Hicke: I'd like to go back to the vineyard and ask you about some experimenting that I know you are doing. What about trellising? How did you start, and how did you develop with that?

C.J. Wagner: We have always used trellis. We used to use standard California planting as far as plant density.

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Hicke: You were talking about spacing.

C.J. Wagner: We went beyond that. My dad actually started in 1966 planting 6 x 10, which gave us 720 vines per acre. I think 450 vines per acre was typical, so he had come up quite a bit in plant density just in what he planted in the 1960s.

We put the grapes on wires, and that was kind of a transition time when some wires were going in and some vineyards were still planting without wires. We saw that there was something good in wires, and the gods at Davis said, "For every wire you add, it is going to give you a

better crop, more sunlight, all the goodies." We went ahead and looked into some other trellising.

I went to the University of Bordeaux twice on my trips to France. A professor by the name of Alain Carboneau is the mad wizardry fellow who was at the time running the University of Bordeaux's experimental station for the vineyard operations. Just to go into this vineyard was amazing, because some of the vines were thirty or forty years old, and they were any configuration or wire system that you could imagine. He had come to develop what is commonly called the Carboneau system--open lyre. Open lyre really interested me, but also I saw a lot of what else he was doing over there.

We also hire from time to time a consultant, a fellow by the name of Paul Skinner. He is a UCD graduate. He wrote me a letter one day and said he was out of school, and he had his doctorate. Did we have any specific problems that we couldn't come to grips with, and could he help? I said, "Yes, we have red leaf here, and we can't seem to get rid of this stuff." So he came on board with us at the time. He had studied a lot about trellising. I think his doctorate is in soils and plant science, but he had a lot to do with trellising. He had seen what had happened when he had been to Germany and that sort of thing, so he had a lot of great ideas on trellising as well.

We really got involved in trellising with Paul, and we fast became the experimental station for Paul himself, our ideas going together. We did some Carboneau, but we also did various other systems. The jury is still out on what the best system is, and certainly we do know at this point that it is site specific; one site is good for one trellis, and one site is good for another. As to which trellises are going to give us the best quality, the jury is still out.

We have probably six systems that we utilize and think have merit. There are some we found that we don't like. We are using systems from France, Germany, South Africa, and Australia.

Importance of Soil

C.J. Wagner: I want to also tell you, and this is very important, that when you have a certain soil--let's say we have Cabernet out

here, and we have this gravelly loam soil--first of all, it's a given that it is going to make a good wine. The real question is when you have some soil that has made poor Cabernet, and it's rich soil, can you make a trellis system produce a great wine from that soil? We don't know that right now, but it doesn't look very promising.

We are going to make more colorful wines. I'm going to give you an example. We have one trellis system that's up in Rutherford on a piece of property that we lease. We put Merlot on the Carboneau system, but it's also a non-tillage. We planted grasses, and it's just mowed. We have an under-vine watering system that doesn't work just as drip but waters the overall soil. It has worked out tremendously for us, but we don't really want those grapes, because that kind of heavy clay soil we don't think is going to be so inclined to make good wines. So that piece of property we're working as a grower, and we sell those grapes out to another winery. Not all wines can be special.

The trellising systems are not what they are cooked up to be; they're not a cure-all. They're not going to make soils that are not right for Cabernet Sauvignon produce a great Cabernet Sauvignon. The soils that are so inclined to produce great Cabernets are still going to produce them.

Let's just talk about two simple features here, rich soil versus poor soil. I'm saying that rich soil is high organic matter, rich, deep, fertile, great garden soil that you would love to have for your tomatoes in the backyard. The poor soil I'm talking about is gravelly loams that are very high in gravels, and have very little organic matter. The vines don't grow very big, and therefore you don't have a lot of foliage, there are smaller berries and more concentration in your grapes. That's going to produce a better wine.

Can you take that rich soil through one of these new trellising systems and produce that kind of rich wine? It's not going to happen. But what we can do is get better sugars and better colors than what we used to get from that soil and also better yields.

Hicke: It really affects the grapes but not the wine?

C.J. Wagner: Yes. Trellising systems are not going to make all the Cabernet vineyards or Chardonnay vineyards in Napa Valley wonderful. It really has to do with, first, the soil.

Hicke: But trellising does affect the amount of production, color, and so forth of the grape?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, and the ripening. There are a lot of good things about trellising. My major point is that we are not going to be able to start making more Special Selection Cabernet off of our property. That's life.

Special Selection Cabernet

C.J. Wagner: That's one story my dad didn't tell you, and you ought to hear it. My dad grew walnuts. He had one piece that was in for ten years...he never picked a commercial production, and the trees never sized up. It's the soil that I'm talking about that is gravelly and low in organic matter. On this seventy-three acres that he bought here in 1941, there was fourteen acres or so of that poor soil. It was always kind of a thorn in his side; trying to grow anything on that was difficult.

He pulled them out in the mid-sixties, and that's where he planted the Cabernet Sauvignon. Now that's where the Special Selection is grown. So what was for a period of his life a piece of ground that wasn't productive has become what we base our reputation on today. Things really changed for him and his relationship to this piece of property. This is a great piece of property now, and is a high-production piece of property but not a great quality piece of real estate.

Hicke: That's a really clear example of fitting the crop to the soil, isn't it?

Rootstocks

Hicke: Let's talk about rootstocks. What did you start out with, and how did you decide on it?

C.J. Wagner: We started out with St. George, which was the standard stock. Everyone used St. George. In the 1960s we began to plant some A x R #1, but we stayed with St. George. We don't need to talk about the A x R #1 much. Simply stated, it is a variety that UCD really thought was great, and all the growers thought was great, because it would make great size

and great crops within four or five years of planting. Therefore you got your money back, and everybody thought, "This is great."

Hicke: Sort of the same story as the land [the more fertile land looks better for production]?

C.J. Wagner: Yes, very much so. Then the phylloxera issue comes up. First of all, it's a bad rootstock, period. Even without phylloxera, it's a bad rootstock. A x R #1 does not have longevity, and it tends to produce too much crop. It's a good grower and a good producer, but that's not what we're after. So it's a bad rootstock to start with. Phylloxera is just one of the keys that made it come out of the ground here.

There has been a mad rush, and the mad rush is for what they use elsewhere in the world: What do the French use? What do the South Americans and South Africans use? We got books and books and books. You know, you can't wait to get those French books translated into English so you can read them and see what the hell they mean. We have had people come in and translate certain parts of the books were that were foreign.

Now we're planting so many rootstocks that we aren't sure which ones are good. One of the standards is still St. George, and 5C has been planted widely for fifteen or twenty years, and it has pretty much been proven to be a good stock here. Now we are planting all the unknowns that have had great success in Europe.

Hicke: You'll have to wait several years before you can even see what it does to the grape, let alone the wine.

C.J. Wagner: There you go. Isn't that terrible? It's like you are working for your kids or your grandkids around here. [laughter] It takes too damned long.

Chuck Wagner's Family

Hicke: That brings up a good question. Can you tell me about your family?

C.J. Wagner: I'm divorced, and I'm married again and looking towards another child. There was one on the way, but my wife

miscarried. We're going to start again pretty soon, I hope. I have three kids, two boys and one girl.

Hicke: Can you give me their names?

C.J. Wagner: Charlie (named after my father), Joe, and Jenny. They are all pretty much enthused about what the winery is doing. What a difference between the way things were, and the way I felt about farming then, and now. Both boys are now in the same school, in sixth and eighth grade in middle school. Joe, the one who is in sixth grade, told me, "You know, everybody is wearing Caymus sweatshirts at school." It's one of the "in" thing for kids to wear. How things change 180 degrees.

Hicke: That must have really made you feel good.

C.J. Wagner: Oh, yes, it sure does. We don't make many sweatshirts; we just do a few, and I guess they're hard to come by, so it's cool if you have one.

Hicke: Just like the pricing--make them scarce. [laughter]

Is your daughter interested in the winery?

C.J. Wagner: She hasn't shown an interest at this point. I haven't put her to work. As a matter of fact, the first year of work for Joe was this year, and he is eleven. Jenny is six. The boys are not only involved with working around here, but they are also in 4-H. I work with 4-H a little bit. They raise project animals like pigs and sell them at the fair.

Hicke: Your dad raised a lot of pigs in his day.

C.J. Wagner: He's only mad that we don't give the pigs all the leftover lettuce and so forth: "That's what pigs are for!" But the kids raise these pigs, and they have to gain about two pounds a day in weight until the fair. If you start giving them off foods, they don't gain weight; they don't digest it. That's kind of a pet peeve of my dad and my boys right now.

Hicke: In a sense you are working for the future. It sounds like you might have some up-and-coming winemakers.

C.J. Wagner: Yes, I like to think that. I like to think that our family is going to stay in the tradition. We feel like we've been in business a long time, but really we're just babes in this business. I mean, California is a babe compared to what Europe has got going. So we can start this now, providing we

don't have prohibitionism ruin it for us like it did last time. Gosh, there have been some great things said about wine as far as health issues. I don't drink wine for health as much as I just drink it as a beverage for a meal. When I don't have wine, I don't know what to drink. Water doesn't hit it, iced tea I don't drink, soda I don't drink.

Hicke: Do you have nieces and nephews?

C.J. Wagner: I have two sisters, who have never been involved in the winery. I was the youngest child, so by the time I was out of school my sisters were already out of college, married, and gone. They seem to have other interests. It would be all right with me [if they did have an interest], because I think it would be great to get more of the family involved. My nephew does work here however, he grows an organic garden on a small piece.

Hicke: I think I saw him. Does he wear a cowboy hat?

C.J. Wagner: I'm not sure. You'd know him if you saw him, because his hair goes way down his back. He's all organic. I don't mind having him around. He's too far gone, but maybe I'm too far the other way. He won't eat processed foods.

Hicke: He doesn't object to wine?

C.J. Wagner: Wine is okay by him.

Organic Farming

Hicke: Are you doing any organic farming? I assume his is a household garden.

C.J. Wagner: His garden is commercial, selling goods to local restaurants. As for the vineyard, we'll never go on the record--at least now--as an organic farm, but all the vineyards we are buying from are run organically. It's easy to do; it's not a big issue. What I'm afraid of is if we were to go organic and say "organically grown" for four years on the label, all of a sudden one year the white fly would come up. Insects have been devastating ag crops forever, so we should learn from history that it would be a mistake. All of a sudden one year it doesn't have "organic" on the label, and people would say, "What did you do? Are you using insecticides this year?"

Hicke: I don't know if being organic is such a plus in the wine business. Some people are making a lot out of it.

C.J. Wagner: You know what? Organically grown grapes is what Fetzer is doing, for instance. People construe that to be organic wine, but it's just organically grown grapes. It's real hard to make organic wine and make it last. You have to have little bits and pieces of sulfur and whatever might be necessary for longevity and antioxidation. I like organic, and one of the things I did in my tenure here was to apply some insecticides here and there. I think my goal is to make it so that my kids will never have to do that. I didn't use to believe all the ecologists who talked bad about Chevron or Dow or whoever was making a chemical. They said that there were other approaches that could work and that these companies were just feeding us with material that nay not be all that safe. To a point I now agree with that theory.

I think it's so easy to handle organically that, gosh, why would we ever consider using insecticide again? I also think there are mechanical means in our industry which we haven't even researched yet. We already have a new influx of insectaries--people who produce bugs that you can let loose into certain environments.

Hicke: Lady bugs?

C.J. Wagner: Lady bugs have proven to go away. You put them on one property, and they move to the next piece. [laughter] But there are other insects, like predatory wasps that will prey on the unwanted pests.

Hicke: We've talked about organic farming. What would organic winemaking involve?

C.J. Wagner: There has been a lot of work done on organic winemaking, and no one has really made an organic wine that has done wonders.

Hicke: What is an organic wine? No sulfites, no nothing?

C.J. Wagner: Exactly. The sulfur that we work with, we wouldn't be able to use. That's it. Sulfur is our best friend. It's one of those things that we all live with. It's mined naturally out of hillsides.

Hicke: What other kinds of experimentations are you involved in?

C.J. Wagner: Once you learn how to make wine and you taste a different variety or style, you are always inclined to, try and make

it. If you are a beer maker and are making a light lager, and all of a sudden this guy is starting to make some heavy-duty Bock beer, you know you have the ability, and you want to try it. The same thing goes for Cabernet. We know how to make Cabernet, but we're certainly looking into the other varietals, some of the new ones, like Viognier. We crushed our first Sangiovese this year. I don't know what we are going to do with it; I have no idea. Our experiment blocks include six other varieties.

I can't think of anything other than that that we are really developing. We're typical.

Hicke: I'm sure there are other things that will come to mind later.

A Single-Vineyard Cabernet

Hicke: Let me ask you about the Special Selection Cabernet that has gotten these tremendously high ratings from *The Wine Spectator*. Do you have any comment on that or how that came about? I think it's pretty unusual.

C.J. Wagner: Oh, I think it is, too. I think if you add up all our Special Selections since '75, I believe it will equal an average of 94.5. The lowest is 90, and then we had four great years; '84, '85, '86, and '87 were 98, 99, 98, and 98. Even the supposedly poor years, '88 and '89, we were able to capture a 94 and a 93.

I'm not sure what it means. I explained that we strive for a style, and we are one of the few wineries that were able to arrive at a certain wine style--and a distinct style, I might add--and have been able to continue producing that every year. If you want to talk about the single-vineyard Burgundies--well, we are a single-vineyard Cabernet producer, because everything comes from the same land, and the wines always have this certain character and flavor to them. And we produce them so that they always taste similar, aside from what Mother Nature gives you for one year to the next which can vary to a degree.

I feel as though we have fine-tuned the Cabernet Sauvignon varietal for Caymus. In some eyes, we have set a standard for the state, and I guess I'm more proud of that than I am of *The Wine Spectator* ratings. We find that people try, through different ways, to emulate what we're doing.

They try to come to grips with what barrels they are using, where their vines are planted, in what soil, and that sort of thing. We take that all as a big compliment. I guess my fears that we're going to fall from the limelight lessen as time goes on, and I don't know if that's a dangerous feeling or not.

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C.J. Wagner: I'm not so concerned about not being the hottest property in California as I am about having a product that people who appreciate wine very much can rely on and use as a standard. I'm really proud that when people go overseas, they'll pack a couple of bottles of our wine along and use that as an example of where they came from: "This is what we produce."

Hicke: That is a compliment.

C.J. Wagner: If we can continue to do those sorts of things, that's it.

Hicke: I notice that you are going to do a vertical tasting for *The Wine Experience* in New York. Which wines are you going to be tasting?

C.J. Wagner: I've forgotten. We cut the list down to eight wines, but it is going to be showing of older versus new wines. I not only want to show the old style--because we had somewhat of a change from the oldest wines to, say, the mid-eighty wines, like '84, '85, '86, and '87, which were of a different style--but also I want to show one new wine that isn't bottled yet that is upcoming. I'm going to try to show not only the consistency of Caymus Special Selection Cabernet but also to show people what the ageability is like, how the style has evolved, and what the wine tastes like in an undeveloped stage.

Hicke: That should be very interesting.

C.J. Wagner: We'll see. I hope so. This is a really big event for us.

Hicke: I think that answers most of the questions I have on my list. Is there anything you can think of that we haven't covered?

Maternal Ancestors

C.J. Wagner: I could talk about my mother's family. We didn't talk about that at all.

Hicke: I'd like to hear about that.

C.J. Wagner: They're the ones who actually put us here earlier as far as my bloodline goes. My dad's family came in 1906, but my mother's family came I believe in the 1870s. They were the first settlers on Howell Mountain. They planted a vineyard, and they homesteaded 150 acres.

Hicke: Do you know what they planted?

C.J. Wagner: No, I don't know what variety. We went up there to check it out--the first time I had been up there was about a year ago--and the foundation of the house is there, and the garbage is there, untouched. Other people have lived in that house, but the garbage looks untouched. My cousin and I are going to go up there when we get time and go through the garbage to see if we can find anything of family historical value.

If we count them as grape growers, that means that my family has been growing grapes continuously in Napa Valley longer than any other family. After twenty years they moved down to the Rutherford area, and by that time nine more families had moved up to Howell Mountain. My great-grandfather worked as right-hand man to Gustav Niebaum, and upon Gustav's death took over as winemaker and manager of Inglenook until his retirement.

Hicke: What was your great-grandfather's name?

C.J. Wagner: Lafayette Stice. I see his picture in that little cabinet up there at Inglenook. This part of my family came here with the second Donner party. There was the first Donner party, who met with the hard weather and had to turn to all the drastic things, and my family came with a second group that started with about 100 and came here with 101; one died, but two were born. They were early settlers.

Hicke: Was the whole family named Stice?

C.J. Wagner: Glos and Stice. My grandfather Glos, my mom's dad, developed what is called the chip bud. It doesn't mean a lot to us sitting here, but it is a form of grafting or putting on a

scion to a rootstock. In other words, you plant your rootstock in the ground, and then you come through and graft it. Chip bud means that you just put a little bud right into the side of the growing rootstock, wrap it with rubber, cut off half the top, and cover it up. Next spring, you come through, cut the rubber and check the bud. If the bud is good, you cut the whole top off, and from that one bud comes the grapevine. He invented chip budding, and it's been around the world. This method is used in other countries also.

Hicke: That's wonderful. You might have inherited a little of your palate for tasting wines.

C.J. Wagner: Maybe, but there were no secrets. People always think there is some family secret.

Hicke: It's marvelous that your family has been here for so long. Were other members of your mother's family involved besides those two?

C.J. Wagner: I have a few cousins who work in wineries, but no, not really, not in a big way.

Ideas for the Future

Hicke: Skipping quite a few years ahead, let me just ask you what you see for the future.

C.J. Wagner: I already answered that, I think. The family continues on, and we would like to start a tradition that we look over to Europe and see has been going on for years. We're almost adamant about investors or anyone wanting to purchase this property. There are probably cycles that we haven't seen yet, or maybe in history there are cycles that look back at. But let's just put it this way: if times really get bad, land values fall, and no one buys wine, we will probably still be here. I don't see that we will ever sell out. If we ever come back to just growing something other than grapes, I wouldn't be surprised; but we'll probably still be here.

Something we don't want to do is just cash out. That's not what we want to do, and I think the whole family feels that way. My dad wanted to be sure that the family has this property, it's going to stay in the family; it's not going to

leave the family, we're not going to break it up into pieces, and so it has to go on.

I'm sure that in the future we will have to come to grips, as the Europeans have, with how and who to heir the property to; who is going to run the company? The French have come up with a system to the effect that the oldest son takes over the business, and the other sons can't work there--something kind of crazy like that. I don't think I have to worry about that. That's the next generation.

Hicke: I thank you very much for taking the time to do this.

C.J. Wagner: Thank you.

Transcribed and final typed by Judy Smith

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Interviewer-editor, Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, 1985 to present, specializing in California legal, political, and business histories.

Author: Heller, Ehrman, White & McAuliffe: A Century of Service to Clients and Community, 1991.

Editor (1980-1985) newsletters of two professional historical associations: Western Association of Women Historians and Coordinating Committee for Women in the Historical Profession.

Visiting lecturer, San Francisco State University in U.S. history, history of California, history of Hawaii, legal oral history.

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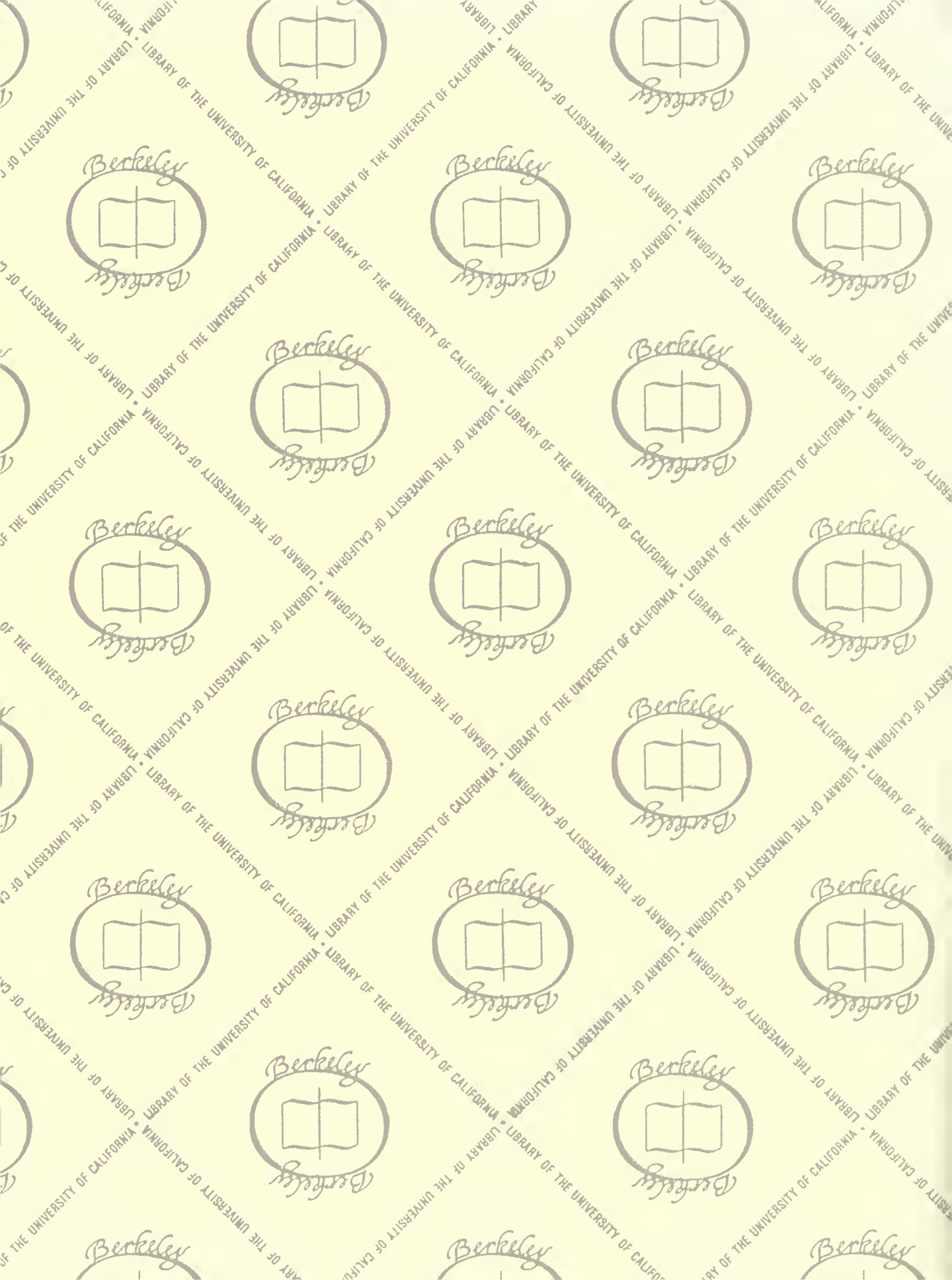
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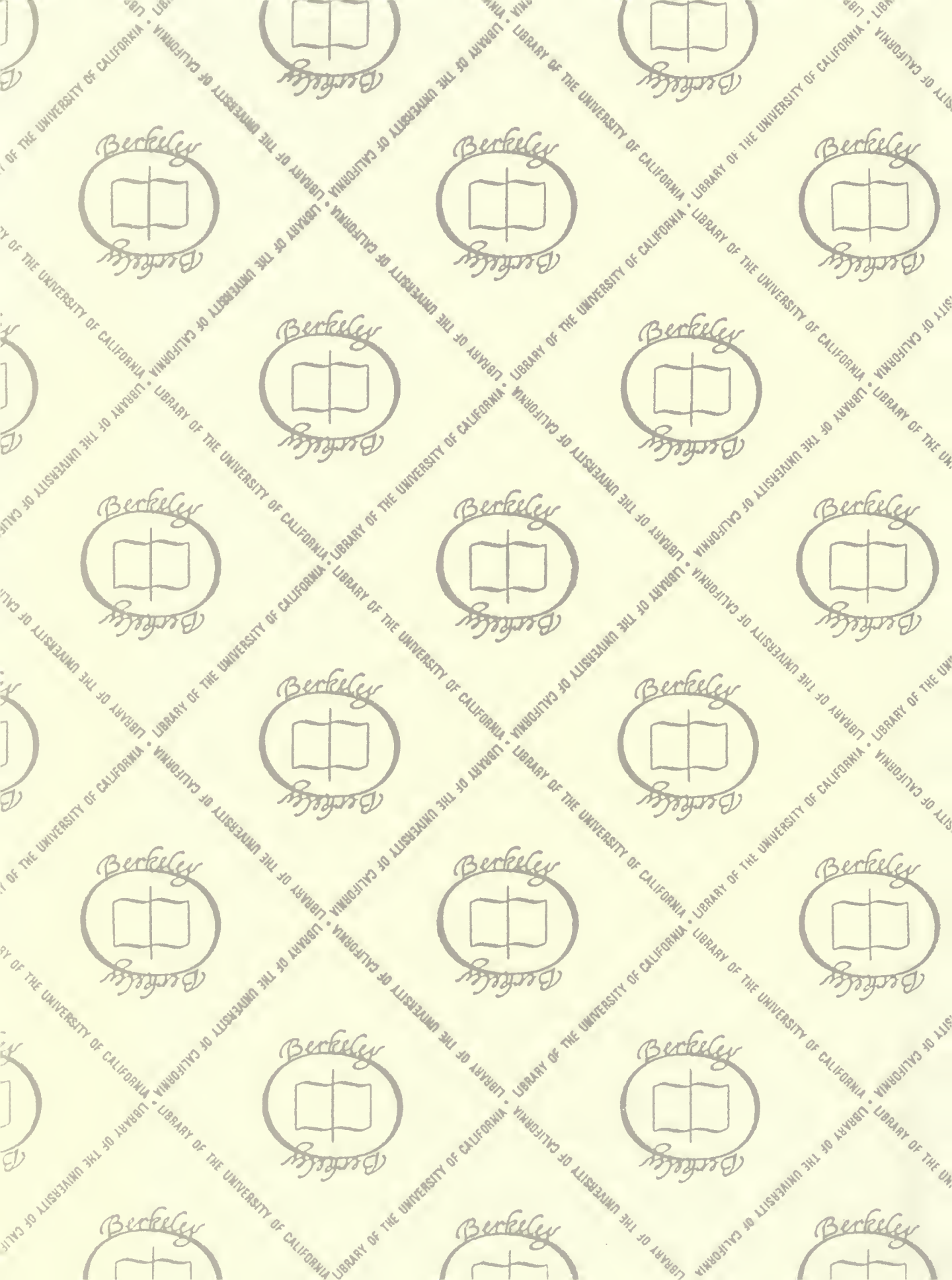
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